10 OUTSTANDING STORIES

ARGOSY

APRIL, 1959

Price in SOUTH AFRICA
AUSTRALIA and NEW ZEALAND
TWO SHILLINGS
AND SIXPENCE

THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

MICHAEL GILBERT

JOHN INGLIS HALL

BERKELY MATHER

ANDREW GRAHAM

GEORGE LANGELAAN

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ARGOSY

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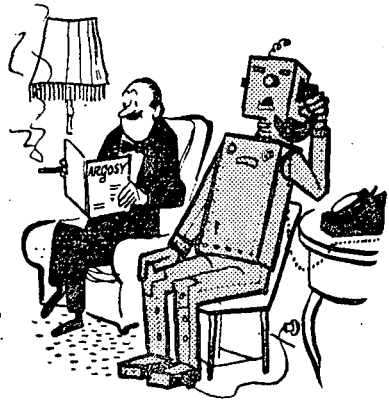
Log Book



THE telephone is a wonderful device. We have been extremely gratified to discover empirically that in one of the new tuppenny twelve-second trunk calls it is possible to say, " Did you take my copy of Argosy to read in the train? If so, please send it back by the first post tomorrow," and still leave some time for vituperation.

In Birmingham and other enlightened cities they are now introducing telephone recording devices, so that when you ring up your friend Walters, a tinny, but polite, voice answers and says, " This is Mr. Walters' telerecorder speaking. Mr. Walters is in conference at the moment. Will you ring back in half an hour or will you wait for the signal and record a message? "

If it was speaking the truth it would probably say, " Walters is in the bath," or " Walters is reading the last part of Berkely Mather and doesn't want to be disturbed."

SMART OPERATORS

Gadgets of this kind are presently going to revolutionise crime fiction. Of course, the villainous Dr. Dakobra, King of the Underworld, has something a good deal more elaborate strapped on *his* telephone: a sort of electronic Ernie answers when the intrepid detective hero rings up, recognises his voice (no matter how disguised) by a series of cybernetical computations, and snarls in the best Carl Peterson manner, " Ha, ha, my young friend, did you think you could put one over on me? Irma and I are one too many for you; we can put two and two together too! Your number's up." Irma, a kindred device, stands for Insulated Radioelectronic Mendacity Assessor, and is a telephonic lie-detector.

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Thus the King of Crime is enabled to scrutinise Scotland Yard's plans without even answering the telephone himself.

Alas, his own go-ahead methods defeat him; he is betrayed by his faithless machines. Ernie and Irma elope together and apply for positions with the Civil Service.

VESTED INTEREST

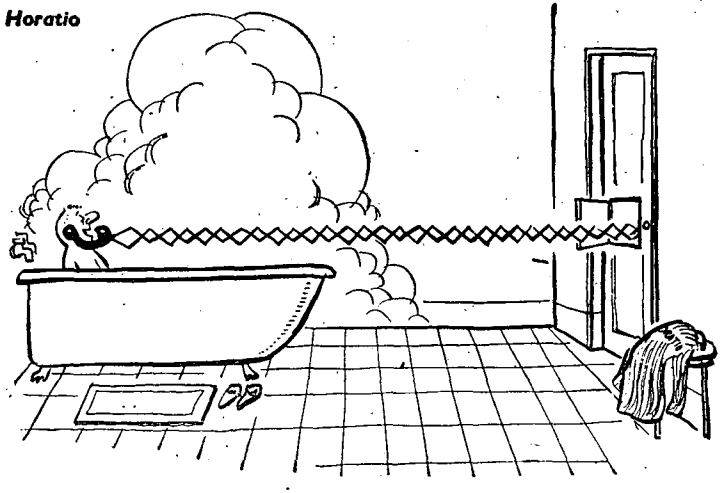
Another recording device that took our fancy was the tiny running-commentaries on famous works of art which you can carry in your pocket while making the circuit of a picture gallery. Pondering this useful accessory we realised the limitless possibilities of playback. Why not a vest-pocket recorded version of some of your favourite Argosy stories, so that, if dragged to a boring film or tedious party, you could happily and mentally absent yourself from uncongenial surroundings?

ARGOSY WAYBILL

Newcomers this month; novelist **Guthrie Wilson**; **Jane Gaskell**, our youngest author to date apart from Daisy Ashford—more about her on page 95; and **Arturo Vivante**, an Italian living in U.S.A. who recently turned from medicine to writing.

Argosy's old friend, well-known radio writer **Norman Edwards** contributes a piece of gastronomy with a ghoulish glint; and there are new stories by **Langelaan**, **Gilbert**, **John Inglis Hall**, and **Andrew Graham**, author of *The Club*, whose latest novel, *A Foreign Affair*, came out recently.

JOHN SILVER



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FETCHING DORA FITCHETT

When she screamed, he stopped and turned to look at them

BY GUTHRIE WILSON

THE exact date doesn't matter, but this event took place on a winter evening after a day when the wind had blown without pause down the streets of Wellington. As the bleak day came to its early end and night settled on the city, the wind dropped a little, but it was still a black and gusty night. The only reason rain hadn't fallen was that it was waiting for the wind to drop.

Rain or no rain, it was the sort of night most men would want to spend at home in front of a fire. But not Abe Hennessy, who isn't like most other men anyway, however you look at him. He knew that the wind would have whipped up the waters of the harbour, that the heavy combers would be rolling in to batter against the wharf piles, and that spume blown from the comber crests would be in the air and—well, he likes his elements wild.

Funny thing this, because he's a quiet sort of fellow. But the kind of night I have described suits him; he likes to feel what he's standing on shivering under his feet.

About nine p.m. he went down to Port Nicholson, well muffled up in a heavy coat, and fortified within by a steak and half a bottle of Scotch. He went in past the high gates opposite the entrance to Lyttelton Wharf and walked slowly, because he was battling into head-on gusts, past the new Ferry Wharf, until he came to Pipitea Wharf, lying like a finger on a dirty sea.

He struggled down Pipitea until he came to a glass-fronted, red box which holds a fire hose, about two chains from the seaward end of the wharf. In the lee of this box, backed against the wall of the goods shed to which the box was attached, he sheltered while he recovered.

Because no ship was being worked on Pipitea that night, only skeleton lighting was switched on. Not so far to his right, one of these lights came out from the wall on a bent arm. It threw a yellow glow to the wharf's lip, shining on the two sets of railway tracks set in tarmac, the single line beyond them on which the

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overhead cranes run, on iron bollards shaped like a cow's head, and on the foot-high kerb.

All around him was the roar of the sea and the moaning of the wind. Somewhere near him a tarpaulin flapped. With each heavier gust it cracked like a mat shaken by a furious housewife.

Under his feet he felt the unending movement of the wharf quivering to the sea's beat, and the shudder as a big roller bashed the piles. There was a fair-sized cargo ship tied up to the King's, and he could hear the creaking of her steel hawsers and the sounds like thunder far off when she brushed the fenders.

It was a night with sound effects made for a man like Abe Hennessy.

Just when he had decided to resume walking, two policemen went past with the tails of their blue coats flapping behind them, their bodies bent forward a little into the wind. They didn't see him, but he heard one shout to the other these words, "It was a night just like this."

And he let them go by. It was only later that he realised what they had been talking about.

When he pulled away from the shelter of the red box he noticed at once that the last bracket lamp—the one nearest the sea—was loose, probably hit by a crane load which had been swung too far, and was wobbling to the gusts, throwing its light anywhere between sea and sky.

Just at that moment it chanced to shift in such a way that, for seconds, its light fell on to the end of the wharf. And with surprise he noticed that there was a man standing just a foot or so from the wharf's end.

This man—Abe could see him quite clearly—was wearing a raincoat too short for him. Its belt was drawn tight round his stomach. He looked a mighty long man. He was wearing a cloth cap, its peak pulled so low that it hid most of his face. Although there still had been no rain, he seemed wet through, as though a sheet of spray had gone right over him. He stood there as if he had lost his way.

But only for a second or two. Then he put his hands in his coat pockets.

Straight down the wharf he came, walking with his right knee turned in a little, swaying in his walk but gliding, too. And when he was within two yards of Abe Hennessy, Abe called out, "Evening, stranger!" which isn't his way at all, but this fellow had made him curious because you didn't expect company, cops aside, on Pipitea on a night like this one.

The fellow never twitched a muscle. Shoulders forward, chin tucked into the lapels of his coat, he just went on without his

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footfalls making a sound at all, went on until he reached the shadow under the first crane, and disappeared as though he had fallen into a black pool.

It gave Abe quite a turn for the moment, and he's not the fanciful kind. Then he thought, The guy's wearing rubbers and he's deaf.

But he went towards the nose of the wharf with a sort of prickly feeling for all that, and he admits that, every couple of paces he took, he looked back over his shoulder just to make sure that no fellow in rubber boots was sliding up behind him with a cosh in his hand.

At the end of the wharf he stood for a long time watching the spray rising high above the kerb from the rollers thudding the piles—and tasting the spray, too. And then he went round to the other side of Pipitea, the open side looking towards Aotea Quay.

The first thing he noticed was that there was a big ship, maybe thirty thousand tons of ship, tethered to the wharf. Her butt was lifting as his gaze fell on her, lifting unhurriedly until she seemed as high as a hill against her own meagre lights. Then, slowly, her stern dipped down again.

But there seemed no movement on the ship and none on the wharf beside her.

Ahead of him were several wagons which he knew would be rust-red by daylight but were black as he looked at them. And the few lights on the ship and the fewer on the goods shed wall shone only on boxes of butter apparently abandoned, and bollards like a row of black heads. Or at least that was all he saw at first glance.

Beside one of the wagons was a dark shape he couldn't at first place. It looked human, but it was too wide to be that.

As he walked towards it, still puzzled, it tramped off on two legs to the side of the wharf and he knew not only that it was, really was, human, but also that it was a woman; and he wondered whether his eyes were playing tricks on him that a woman, undeniably a woman, could seem so broad in the beam.

He would have passed by her except that she had planted herself right at the kerb. She was looking down into the water below and looking up at the ship nearby, and Abe could see that the stern of the ship was moving in towards the fenders, and he knew that when the ship rubbed herself on the fenders the whole wharf would shake, and a woman on the wharf's brink might easily be tipped into the water she was gazing at.

More than that, he suddenly felt a sense of panic seize him, and a premonition that what this woman was preparing to do, with or without the ship's aid, was to plunge over the side into that mess

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of seething water belting at the piles. And he ran towards her, calling out words the wind snatched from his lips, and came up to her, seizing her arms to drag her back from the destruction she was contemplating.

She turned on him savagely, and they grappled for a moment. It wasn't, he said, that she was an unnaturally strong woman. It was just that she was so enormous that she was hard to shift.

But in the end he pulled her back to the shelter of a wagon, piled above their heads with crates, to a spot where a bracket lamp threw a patch of light, and where he could talk to her without the wind making communication impossible.

When he looked at this woman he saw that she was quite young—about twenty-five, he guessed.

Her face was big and white—pounds and pounds of uncooked pastry. Her lips were big, too; big and soft like red marshmallows. And her eyes were big, which was strange in a face so fat, so round and fat. She was the best-looking circus fat girl he had seen, he thought.

The look in her eyes was mighty fierce, which surprised him a bit more, because he had expected her to look desperate and overwrought and to give in to tears. But this woman's eyes were hard; she looked the sort of person who had given up crying when she was about five.

She said, full of hate, "Yer'll git nothing from me, mister."

Abe rubbed his chin a bit then. He said, "There's nothing I want. Look . . . er . . ." And of course he didn't know her name. "What're you doing here on a night like this?"

She put her hands on her hips—those hands were a mighty long way apart, too. Anyway she stood with her legs straddled and her hands on her hips, just the way women stand in the back streets of Bari, and she looked at him defiantly.

"That's me own business, pal," she told him. "And if you're a copper it's not what yer think. I don't go ter them, they come ter Dora."

"I wasn't thinking anything. And I'm not a copper," Abe explained. "I just thought—"

"Yer jest thought," she said. "Yer jest thought. That's a good 'un."

"I thought you were going to throw yourself over," Abe shouted.

He was beginning to feel a fool by this time. He's not the sort of man to like feeling a fool either. It's not the sort of feeling he takes in his stride. "I thought you were a suicide."

"Suicide?" she said.

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When she laughed her whole body seemed to shake. Abe thought that the wharf wobbled with her laughter, but that's an exaggeration, of course. Maybe it was only the crates on the wagon. " Look, pal," she told him, " it's lack o' love that makes a girl cut 'er throat. Dora gets plenty o' that."

And her remarkably good eyes beamed at him and her big, soft mouth opened to show that there was nothing wrong with her teeth; and Abe could see that, for all her two hundred odd pounds, she had something that would see to it that she wasn't left without love, if love were her preoccupation.

He said, " My apologies, Miss . . ."

" Fitchett," she told him. " But everybody calls me Dora. I've bin Dora ter everybody ever since Adam was a boy."

" My apologies, Miss Fitchett. It's a hell of a night for a woman to be prowling round places like this. It seemed the only reason why . . ."

" It's my tryst," she said. She said the word to rhyme with the name of the Son of God, which put Abe off the scent for a few seconds. " It's two years ergzac'ly." Then she looked hard at him. " You're a stranger, ain't you? Yer ain't bin here long."

At that time Abe Hennessy had been in New Zealand less than a year. He told her this.

She nodded as though this explained a lot to her. She was wearing one of those plastic rainproof hats on her head and a thick, winter coat, Abe told me.

She said then, " Yer won't know about my Jack. It was two years ago this very night that the coppers tried to get 'im on this same wharf. When the traps were out after 'im 'e was in me own bedroom, and when they searched the boarding 'ouse, 'e was under me bed. When they went away, out 'e came bold as brass and wiped the fluff off his trousers and made love ter me as though all the coppers in town couldn't make 'im turn a hair. Oh, 'e was a fine, real man, my Jack."

And she put her plump hand to her eyes then, but not for long. She said, " Yer got a smoke? "

In the shelter of the wagon and the tallow crates piled on it, he watched her smoke with quick, nervous puffs.

" What were they after him for? " he asked.

" Murder," she said. " But it wasn't that reely. It was that other thing."

" Manslaughter? " he asked.

" Yes. 'E'd bin in a fight, then 'e got lit, and it ended with 'im coshing some joker, and the joker died. Sad, reely. Sad for 'im and sad for Jack and sad fer me, too. I was 'is girl, yer

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know. There was no one else for Jack Stevens 'cept Dora." She took his arm, drawing him away from the truck.

"Yer see that crane? Well, they closed in on 'im and they chased 'im up those steps and they cried out ter 'im to give 'imself up but 'e wouldn't. Jack Stevens never would give 'imself up to anybody, I'm proud ter say. And yer see that ship? D'yer know what it's called? It's the *'Anover Castle.* The very same ship that was tied up at the very same spot, this night two years gone. Now don't yer think that's a funny thing, mister? Two years gone ergzac'ly. Same sort o' windy night. Same crane, same ship."

Abe dropped his cigarette on to the tarmac. Blotted out its tiny, red head with his heel.

"How did it end?" he asked.

"End?" she said. "They drove 'im up that crane there. 'E'd bin lying fer hours on one o' the beams under this wharf with the sea slapping over 'im, yer know. They chased 'im up the steps o' that crane there, and when this ship, this *'Anover Castle*, moved in, 'e jumped. Laughed like the wild devil 'e was, and jumped down between the wharf and the side of the ship. That's 'ow it ended. Two years ago this very night."

"And that's why you came here," he said.

"My tryst," she replied. "'E might be about, yer know."

"Didn't they ever find his body?" Abe asked. And he suddenly became aware that the wind had dropped. Dropped, wasn't right, either. There wasn't any wind at all. And the sound of the sea was no more than a rumble.

In fact, everything around him had gone still, queer and still.

The only time he had felt anything like it before was once, many years back, when he had gone on parade feeling ill, and had been kept standing at attention for a long time and had blacked out. Just before he keeled over he had experienced the same peculiar intensity of silence, as though the whole world was waiting for him to crumple.

The stillness, he said, gave him a sudden creepy feeling and he even looked over his shoulder once, just a glance, and then he looked quickly at the woman who called herself Dora to see if she had noticed, but she hadn't.

"They found it," she said. "They told me it was 'is. Yer couldn't tell. Not even me. But the coppers said it was."

"Yer couldn't tell." Those were words which really got under Abe's skin.

He said that he had a lousy feeling that things weren't as they should have been, that something was going to happen to him that he wouldn't like much.

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He put his hand on her back to shove her along, and said, "It's time we weren't here. I'll buy you a drink."

But she planted herself firmly and wouldn't be moved. He couldn't see her face now.

"'E said 'e'd come back," she whispered. Abe said that she really did whisper, but he heard every word of it and that shows how quiet it was.

"Allus 'e said that. 'I'll come back an' fetch yer, Dora,' was what 'e said. 'I'll come back an' fetch yer.' If 'e means to come, it's the night fer it."

The way she said it froze the blood in his veins. He took her arm roughly, turned her towards the city with her back to the sea, and began to walk her with him.

And then, from out of the black pit below the nearest crane came a man, growing larger and more menacing with each onward, soundless step. When Dora screamed he stopped; then he turned, not just his head but his whole body, to look at them.

He was a tall man dressed in a raincoat too short for him, with a belt drawn very tightly round his stomach. He was wearing a cloth cap, its peak pulled so low that it hid most of his face. He was wearing rubber boots and had the ends of his trousers tucked into them. It was the same man, all right.

And Dora walked one step nearer to him, and another, and said, very timidly, "Jack! Jack, dear! Oh, Jack, it's bin so *long*! Is it reely you?" But she didn't sound happy. She sounded as scared as Abe was himself.

The man she called to lifted his hand to the peak of his cap. He pulled the cap from his head. His face was long and narrow, and made to seem even more narrow because his ears were too flat.

He had a long, hooked nose and black hair swept back. The hair was sodden. In fact there was nothing about him that was not sodden—coat and boots and hair and flesh.

He looked at Abe Hennessy. Light fell on his head and shoulders in that moment. White, chalk-white his face; dead and evil his eyes. To Abe Hennessy, standing paralytic, incapable of stirring a finger to defend Dora or even himself, the gaze that met his was the most profoundly evil he had ever seen, that of a man straight up from the sea where he'd lain two years with the crabs and other things that crawl on its floor.

The man she had called Jack Stevens took Dora's hand in his own. He smiled at her, and his smile was the kiss of death. Dora whimpered then. He put his arm along her shoulders. He began to walk and Dora went with him like a two-hundred-pound sleepwalker. They strolled to the end of the wharf

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where no spray rose now. In the mildewed smear of light at the wharf's end they stopped as if Jack Stevens had lost his way, but only for seconds before he lifted Dora over the edge, raising her great bulk as though it was made of fluff.

She went from Abe's sight, and then carefully, deliberately, Stevens followed her. The last he saw of them was the sick light shining on Stevens' white fingertips. The wind moaned wildly once, the *Hanover Castle* rumbled the fenders, and the fingers lifted.

And Abe Hennessy, merchant seaman from battlefields all over the Atlantic, turned and ran from the sea and the things that come out of it towards the city and the lights of the city which, most times, he doesn't value much, but valued then.

© Guthrie Wilson 1959

NOT CAPABLE OF PROOF

Late one evening the massive figure of G. K. Chesterton stood outside the locked door of the Bodley Head in Vigo Street . . . As it happened, Mr. Harris, the accountant, was in a little room on the first floor, seated on an office stool and muttering over figures. Hearing the bell, he descended, unlocked the front door and confronted the formidable visitor. Chesterton carried a black Gladstone bag and from this he had already removed a set of proofs. As the door opened he offered this to Mr. Harris.

" I have brought my corrected proofs," he said in that near-falsetto tone which always seemed to emanate surprisingly from so gargantuan a frame. " But I seem to have done so rather late in the day."

" Oh, yes, sir," replied Mr. Harris, a rueful type of individual with an unkempt sandy beard and spaniel eyes. " The office staff have all gone long ago. I'm just the accountant, you see. But if you care to leave the proofs with me I'll see they're handed to the right quarter."

Chesterton presented him with the proofs. " Thank you very much," he said. " I am greatly obliged to you for your courtesy. In fact I would like to give you a practical demonstration of my gratitude." He drew a bottle from the Gladstone bag as he spoke. " Will you join me in a glass of port? "

" Oh, thank you very much, sir," said Harris. " But I'm afraid I can't do that. The fact is I'm a teetotaller."

" Good heavens," exclaimed Chesterton, the unnatural falsetto rising to a top note of horror. " Give me back my proofs."

BEN TRAVERS, *Vale of Laughter*
An Autobiography

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SAFE AND SOUNDPROOF

The two burglars, hoarse and exhausted, were glad to go quietly

BY JOAN AIKEN

THERE she sat, pretty as a bumble-bee with her gold eyes and brown hair, attracting even more attention than men with hydraulic grabs on building sites. She sat behind a sheet of plate glass in Dowbridge's window, at a desk that was all made of glass, and she had a mighty mirror behind her.

At her side was a dear little electric furnace, all in white, and on the desk was a guillotine; not the sort fed by tumbrils full of aristos, but a handy paper-cutting size. With this she was demolishing stacks and stacks of documents, cutting them into slivers like bacon, and then turning them round and repeating the process crossways until she had a mound of confetti. When it was knee-high she slid the whole heap into a plastic basket and shot it into the furnace.

Pile after pile of paper the furnace wolfed down with the barest flicker of acknowledgment, and Roger Mauleverer, watching through the window, thought of pine forests in Sweden and Canada, vast stretches of spruce and redwood towering majestically in snow and sunshine, all destined to total extinction after this girl had done with them. He felt quite cross about it, for he liked trees. But he had to admit that the girl was very attractive.

Over her head, right across the plate glass, he could read the inscription: CONFIDENTIAL RECORDS EFFECTIVELY DESTROYED UNDER GUARANTEE.

The first two weeks Ghita Waring sat in the window, her boss, who had a flair for publicity, tied a bandage over her eyes so that it was plain she couldn't read the documents she was chopping. But she cut her finger three times.

The following week he put her in dark glasses, but he had to admit that the gold eyes were a loss. So the fourth week he contented himself with a notice on the front of her desk:

SHE ONLY READS MUSIC; YOUR SECRETS ARE SAFE WITH HER.

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Ghita's old headmistress, who happened to pass by and see this, was very annoyed about it and complained that it was a poor advertisement for her school, but Ghita merely laughed and said she didn't mind; anyway, it was almost true. Though she added that she could read cookery books if the words weren't too long. She managed to conceal her really dangerous gift; if it had been discovered she would hardly have landed the job.

It was a never-failing pleasure for passers-by to stop and watch her, and wonder what she was cutting up now.

"That's a will," muttered Sidey Curtiss to Bill Brewer. "Bang goes the long-lost blooming heir. Now what's she got?"

"Might be an agreement. See the red seal?"

"There goes a confidential file; some bloke's past history smoking up the chimbley. Pity she couldn't chop up your record, Bill, eh? Just phone police headquarters and tell 'em to send it along in a plain van."

Bill took this bit of humour coldly. "Why not ask 'er to chop off your fingerprints while she's at it?"

A van drew up beside them; not a plain one. It was one of Pickering and Pumphrey's expensive-looking utilities. Beside the driver sat Miss Inglis, the gaunt, severe secretary of old Mr. Pumphrey himself. She got out of the van with dignity and marched inside, carrying a large roll of paper. She talked for a short time with the golden-eyed girl at the desk and then came out again, leaving the document behind her. She stepped back into the van and was buzzed away down to the immense and gleaming new office-building that Pickering and Pumphrey had just erected at the other end of the square.

"Wonder what they're getting rid of?" speculated Sidey.

"Something old Pumphrey doesn't want to be blackmailed about," suggested Bill. "Cor, here comes a smasher." He stared approvingly at a sapphire-and-mink blonde who burst out of a taxi like a ray of sunshine coming out of a cloud. "Bet *she's* got some compromising letters."

The blonde sailed inside, and presently the two watchers saw her pull a bundle of letters from her magnificent handbag and pass them across to the girl at the desk. They saw her talking vigorously.

"It really does seem a shame to destroy them," was what she was saying. "They're so romantic. I can't bear for someone not to see them. You read them, ducky. You must get bored chopping away all the time and never a chance of a peep. And Roger's letters are as good as Shakespeare; they're so poetic they always make me cry. It's like murdering a child to have them

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guillotined." She dabbed at her eyes. " But he says I've got to. See, in the last letter."

Ghita looked at the top one. *Dear Rosemary*, it said baldly, *in view of developments, please destroy all my letters. I am returning yours herewith.*

" That's not very poetic, surely, " Ghita said.

" Ah, but look at the earlier ones, ducky."

It certainly was rather a treat for Ghita to be allowed to read a document before destroying it, and she glanced at one or two of the letters towards the bottom of the pile. When she read them her golden eyes became larger and rounder and mistier. " Why, they're beautiful," she breathed.

" Aren't they," said Rosemary with satisfaction. " I do miss him, you know. No one else has ever said such beautiful things to me." She dabbed her eyes again. " Oh, would you mind giving me a testimonial, or whatever you call it, saying you've destroyed them? Roger is so fierce, and he's been beastly enough to me as it is. I don't want any more trouble." Her lip quivered.

The man must be a brute, Ghita thought indignantly. Fancy writing letters like that to a girl, and then making her destroy them; demanding it so curtly, too.

I hereby certify, she wrote, *that I have destroyed twenty hand-written letters to Miss Rosemary Trench-Giddering from " Roger," Quincetree Cottage, Broken End, Hazeldean.*

Why, she thought to herself in sudden enlightenment, he must be the young architect that Mother's always talking about, who's taken Quincetree Cottage. I shouldn't have thought he'd been there long enough to write twenty letters. And then he asks her to destroy them. What a trifler! What a snake in the grass!

" That will be ten and six, please," she said.

" Thank you, ducky," said Rosemary. She gave a last dab to her eyes, a lingering glance at the last letter coming under the headsman's axe. " Ah well . . ." She straightened her shoulders with a billowing glitter of mink, dazzled Ghita with her smile, and ran out to the taxi, which was still stolidly ticking up threepences.

" Now 'e won't be able ter prove a thing," muttered Sidey to Bill. The drama had gone out of the window, but they still lingered in the spring sunshine watching Ghita, who had pulled towards her the large scroll left by Miss Inglis.

Absently she scanned it, and then blushed pink as she realised that she had violated professional ethics. Being allowed to read Rosemary's letters had led her astray.

She glanced up, scowled at the two seedy watchers outside, and grabbed her guillotine. In her confusion she let the scroll

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slip and it rolled to the floor, displaying its contents. She pounced on it and minced it into ribbons as if it had bitten her. Anyway it was only a blueprint; no possible harm could come from her having glanced at it.

"Did you see what that was?" said Bill to Sidey. "It was the plans of Pickering and Pumphrey's new office building."

"Well, what of it?" said Sidey. "Come on, I'm getting cold. I want a cuppa."

"What of it, you daft fool, what *of* it? Why, don't you see . . ."

He was talking urgently as they moved off to the Bide-Awile Café.

It was bad luck on Ghita that she had a photographic memory.

"Some people are coming in for drinks," Mrs. Waring said when Ghita went home on Friday. "That nice young Mr. Mauleverer who's taken Quincetree Cottage will be here. I think I've mentioned him before."

"Only about forty times," said Ghita, but she said it to herself. She knew, and her mother knew that she knew, and she knew that her mother knew that she knew, that Mrs. Waring disapproved of Ghita's chopping documents by day in order to put herself through music school at night. Both these occupations were nonsensical, Mrs. Waring considered; the sort of fandangle that a girl who was engaged, say to a nice young architect, would soon put behind her.

Nice young Mr. Mauleverer indeed, Ghita thought, hugging her mother affectionately. I could tell you a thing or two about that two-faced fiend in human form if I weren't a model of professional discretion. Just don't let him try his come-hither tactics on me, that's all.

Nice young Mr. Mauleverer had a somewhat familiar face. After a little thought Ghita identified him as the tall, dark young man who had passed by her shop window nine or ten or eleven times in the course of the last few days. So that's who you are, is it, she thought, and she gave him such a flash of her eye, along with one of her mother's walnut canapés, that he staggered as if he had been stabbed with an eighteen-carat tiepin.

"I hear you are studying music," he said, recovering. "I compose a little myself."

"Oh, do you?" Ghita said, interested in spite of herself. "What sort of things?"

"Songs," Roger Mauleverer said, and for some mysterious reason he chuckled. "I write songs."

The chuckle incensed Ghita. "I shouldn't think you have a great deal of time for writing songs," she said icily. "Writing

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letters must be such an engrossing occupation." She gave him a meaning look, and he eyed her warily.

"Am I to infer that my ex-fiancée has been to you professionally?"

"Miss Trench-Giddering has confided in me and has all my sympathy. But my lips are sealed," Ghita said firmly. And that's settled *him*, she thought with satisfaction. Now we know where we stand with one another.

She darted another disapproving, golden flash at him; was pleased to see that it appeared to leave him quite prostrated; and went on to offer her walnut canapés with the utmost grace and charm to ninety-years-old Great Uncle Wilberforce.

On Wednesday, when Ghita was having her elevenses over the local paper, in between spells of guillotining, her satisfaction was given a jolt, and she was more than a little disconcerted to read a report of the wedding of Miss Rosemary Trench-Giddering to Mr. Cecil Quayle, M.P., with eight bridesmaids and all the trimmings. There were several photographs, and it was easy to see that Mr. Quayle, prosperous though he seemed—and as Ghita knew him to be, for he owned the town's largest factory—was about three times the age of the bride, who could hardly be seen behind the enormous diamond she wore.

Ghita began to feel a little contrite and remorseful. Lifting her eyes to the window she thought that supposing, just supposing, Roger Mauleverer were to pass by, as he had done some eight or nine or ten times in the last few days, there would be no harm in giving him a friendly smile. But there was nobody outside the window except those two seedy-looking toughs who seemed to have spent a lot of time loitering round there lately.

She turned back to the paper and a familiar name caught her eye: Roger Mauleverer, A.R.I.B.A.

Roger Mauleverer, A.R.I.B.A., was, it appeared, the architect responsible for the large new office building recently erected in the town's main square on behalf of the local firm of Pickering and Pumphrey; the building had just been completed and the ceremonial tape cut by Mrs. Pumphrey, wife of the Managing Director.

An unusual feature of the building was the hidden safe-deposit room concealed on one of its nine floors. No one knew the whereabouts of this soundproof room except Mr. Pumphrey, Mr. Harris the chief cashier, and the architect himself. Even the plans of the building had been destroyed so that unauthorised persons could not stumble on the information. The door of the room was opened by the newest form of electronic device; it would respond only to a code word spoken outside it. Needless

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to say, this code word was known to only three people, Mr. Pumphrey, Mr. Harris the chief cashier, and to the architect . . .

And to me, Ghita thought in cold horror. The type of the newspaper swam before her guilty eyes. Never, never, she thought, would she look at another document, however innocuous it appeared; no, not if fifty people begged her to on their bended knees. She knew now what that blueprint had been; she knew which floor the room was on, she knew which door led to it, and worst of all she knew, for it had been written in the margin, the code word that would open the door.

What ought she to do? Hasten to Mr. Pumphrey and tell him that his secret was discovered? Consult a psychiatrist and ask if there was any way of expunging the guilty knowledge from her mind? Or go to Roger Mauleverer and ask his advice?

Something about the simplicity of the last course commended itself. I'll ask him on Saturday, she thought—for her mother had artlessly invited him to Saturday supper. Nothing much can happen between now and then.

She was very, very wrong.

If she had read the Stop Press column in the evening paper, she would have seen the item headed, MISSING MANAGING DIRECTOR. But she did not. She had a class on Diminished and Augmented Triads at half past six, and, hellbent to get to it, she thrust the evening paper in among her shopping and ran like a doe to the City Literary Institute in Tennyson Street.

It was late when she came out; late and dark and quiet. Tennyson Street, all foggy and cobbled, looked like a set from a French film, and it looked like it still more when two shadowy figures came up softly and menacingly behind Ghita and slipped a sack over her head. Her hands were tied behind her back and she was whisked into an alley that led, as she knew, to the river.

"Don't yell, *don't*," a hoarse voice said warningly in her ear, "because if you do we'll have to treat you rough. Just you keep quiet. We only want you to tell us something and then we'll let you go."

"What do you want?" Ghita gasped inside the bag. A cold premonition had already told her the answer.

"We was watching you the other day a-reading of a blueprint," the voice said ingratiatingly. "We saw your beautiful eyes a-taking of it in. All we want from you is the whereabouts of that there famous secret room at Pickering's what's got a million of di'monds shut away in it; and the code word for opening the door. That's all we want."

"I shan't tell you," said Ghita.

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" Now, duck, don't you be so hasty. If you do tell us, who's to know it was you passed on the information? No one but us knows you read the plan. But if you *don't* tell us—"

" What? " Ghita said uneasily, for he had paused.

" Why, then I'm afraid we shall have to take you to the end of this alley and drop you in the river. Runs powerful fast the river does hereabouts," the voice said reflectively.

Ghita shivered. She had never tried swimming with her hands tied behind her back, but she didn't think she would excel at it.

An idea struck her. " I can't possibly explain where the door is," she said. " It's much too complicated. I can tell you the password. It's Lancashire Hot-Pot. Now will you let me go? "

" Not likely," said Sidey. " You'll have to come with us and show us. Once you get inside the building you'll know where you are. Coming? Or do we have to drop you in the water? "

" All right, I'm coming," Ghita said sadly. " The room's in the basement."

The route they took to Pickering and Pumphrey's was circuitous, and entailed climbing some fences, crossing a bomb site, and cutting through a warehouse. At length they arrived in a wide, dark basement area next to a car park. Sidey, scouting ahead, picked a lock and let them in a service door.

Ghita saw nothing of all this, for her head was still in the sack, but now they took it off and let her look round and get her bearings. Unerringly she led them along a red-and-white tiled corridor in which floated a haunting and evocative smell of stew. It ended at double red doors, chromium handled, and labelled, DIRECTORS' CANTEEN. They were locked.

" Here you are," Ghita whispered. " That notice is a blind. It isn't really the canteen, that's on the first floor. Now you must stand here and say Lancashire Hot-Pot. But you have to say it in a particular tone of voice, and that's what I don't know, because I only saw it written down. You'll have to keep on trying till you hit the right pitch."

" Got it all pat, ain't she," Bill whispered admiringly. " You oughter come into the profession, miss; you'd do champion at it. Now then, Sidey, you try first, tenor and counter-tenor. Then I'll try bass and baritone."

" Lancashire Hot-Pot," said Sidey.

At about the twentieth attempt, when they were getting really enthusiastic, Ghita slipped quietly away round the corner to the little block where LIFTS had been marked on the ground-plan.

Yes, here they were; and in such a modern building they were sure to be automatic. She pressed a button. Luckily they'd had to untie her hands to climb the fences. A lift came gliding down,

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and she tiptoed in and wafted herself up to the ninth floor where, among other things, she remembered having noticed the switchboard room. Thank goodness, the police station was only a couple of blocks away!

But when she stepped out of the lift she was thunderstruck to find lights burning, footsteps clattering, and an atmosphere of hectic activity, very unexpected in an office building at ten minutes to midnight.

Three men hurried past her, distraught and preoccupied.

"Hey!" Ghita said. "There are two burglars in the basement, trying to get into the safe-deposit room."

"Those aren't burglars, my good girl," one of the men said testily. "The building's full of 'em. The Managing Director's got himself stuck inside the strongroom and no one knows where it is. Everybody's trying to find him." Evidently he took her for a member of the staff.

"What about Mr. Harris, the chief cashier?" suggested Ghita, very much taken aback by this new development.

"He's having his spring week sailing in the Baltic."

"Well then, what about . . ."

But they hurried away, calling, "Throgmorton, Throgmorton, have you tried the mezzanine floor?"

"Wait!" Ghita called. She chased them and caught them at the head of the stairs. "I can tell you where the safe-deposit room is!"

"*You* can?" They turned and regarded her with suspicion. "How?"

"Well, never mind that for now," Ghita said. "It's on this floor, the fourth door to the right from the auditors' room."

By this time a group had assembled.

"I tried to get the architect, Mr. Throgmorton," someone panted. "I tried five times. But there's no reply from his number."

"This young person seems to think she knows where the door is," Mr. Throgmorton said with awful majesty.

Ghita's feelings of guilt and confusion intensified. She went tremblingly up to the fourth door and pointed at it. "That should be the one, and the password's Pickled Pumpkins."

Mr. Throgmorton gave her a look which, although she was ice-cold with fright, chilled her still further. He placed himself directly in front of the door, looked at it commandingly, and uttered the words, Pickled Pumpkins, in a sonorous voice.

Nothing happened.

Ghita began to wish that she could fall down the lift-shaft, or, failing that, just drop dead. She wondered what had gone

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wrong. And, now that her password had failed, how was she ever going to introduce the topic of the two safe-breakers in the basement? But at that moment, she noticed that Roger Mauleverer was behind her.

"Ah, Mr. Mauleverer," Throgmorton said reprovingly. "It took you a very long time to get here."

"Long time?" Roger said, puzzled. "I came just as fast as I possibly could. Is Miss Waring all right?" He looked anxiously at Ghita.

"Miss Waring? I am not aware that she has been in any trouble. It is Mr. Pumphrey we are concerned with. Mr. Pumphrey is immured in the strongroom."

"Oh, is that all?" Roger said cheerfully. "We can soon get him out of there."

He stepped up to the door and serenaded it in a pleasing tenor.

Safe, my dear, list and hear!
None but I is standing near.

This seemed an inaccuracy to Ghita, but everybody else was dead serious.

None can pry, none can see,
Open wide your door to me.

The door swung open and revealed Mr. Pumphrey, indignant and ravenous, ensconced in a nest of diamonds and securities.

"I forgot the tune," he said accusingly to Roger. "That's the trouble with these fancy gimmicks!"

"Well, sir," said Roger, "it was your idea to have a tune. If you recall, I was in favour of the simple words Pickled Pumpkins, and it was you who said that you'd look like a fool if one of your staff found you in the corridor saying Pickled Pumpkins, and it would be better if you had a verse that you could sing."

"You must think of something else tomorrow," snapped Mr. Pumphrey. "Have to, anyway, now half the staff's heard it." He glared round, explosive as a turkeycock. "Let alone this young lady who's not a staff member. What's she doing here?"

"She told us where the strongroom was," Throgmorton said.

"What? How the devil did she know that?"

Tremblingly, Ghita confessed how she had come by her knowledge.

"I shall ring up Dowbridge's," Mr. Pumphrey said, with the quiet menace of an impending avalanche. "That's the last of my business they handle. And what, pray, were you doing in my building at this time of night?"

"I was b-brought here by two burglars," Ghita faltered. "They're down in the basement saying L-Lancashire Hot-Pot outside the Directors' Canteen."

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" I beg your pardon? "

But, thank heaven, Roger seemed to have grasped the situation. He murmured something to Throgmorton and the other two men. They shot away in the lift, found Sidey and Bill trying Hot-Pot for the seventy-seventh time in A alt and middle C, and nobbled them. The two burglars, hoarse and exhausted, were glad to go quietly.

" Where is Miss Waring? " Roger asked, when they led the captives before Mr. Pumphrey, who had the telephone in his hand.

" She took her departure," Mr. Pumphrey said severely, " after I had issued her a warning." He put down the receiver.

Poor Ghita crept to her office next morning more dead than alive. Instead of the usual pile of documents awaiting destruction there was one envelope on her desk. It said, *Please read before destroying*. Inside was a week's salary and notice of dismissal from her boss, who had been rung by Mr. Pumphrey at ten minutes past midnight.

Two large tears trickled down Ghita's cheeks and splashed on the glass desk. Absently she slid her notice into the guillotine and sliced it into spills. Then she looked up and saw Roger outside the window. She glared at him. Undeterred, he came in.

" It's all your fault," Ghita stormed at him. " If I hadn't been inveigled into reading your letters I'd never have looked at that blueprint. And now I've got the sack, and I'll probably go to p-prison, and I'll never be able to afford to finish learning about Diminished and Augmented Triads, and what do *you* care? "

" I do care," Roger said. " Very much. I *love* Augmented Triads." Something about the way in which he said this, coupled with the fact that he was holding Ghita in a close embrace at the time, carried instant conviction.

He went on, " I explained to Mr. Pumphrey that you'd been shanghai'd, and he says he's sorry he misunderstood the situation and he'll put it right with your boss."

" But how did you know about it? " Ghita said, wiping her eyes on his lapel, regardless of the interested spectators outside.

" I was lecturing on architecture at the City Literary Institute last night, and I looked out of the window and saw them putting your head in the bag. By the time I'd dashed out you were gone, but I guessed where they'd be making for."

" It was nice of you to bother," Ghita said, and added in a small voice, " I owe you an apology about Miss Trench-Giddering. Did you mind terribly when she married Mr. Quayle? "

" Frankly, no," said Roger, very cheerfully for a rejected suitor. " She was grand for practising my literary style on. But

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I'd be much happier with somebody I could *say* things to, somebody who wasn't always on board a yacht or in the middle of a grouse moor."

"Or sitting in a shop window?"

"Do you like it here?"

"I feel like a goldfish. I'd love a secret room like Mr. Pumphrey's."

"When I marry," he said, "I'm going to build a house with a secret, soundproof music-room, where we can hide from visitors and my wife can practise her Augmented Triads." He tightened his arm round her.

Mr. Pumphrey arrived, scarlet-faced and panting, decanted out of a car like a Perpendicular cathedral turned on its side.

"Miss Waring," he gasped. "I owe you an apology, by the way, but never mind that for the moment. That blueprint you looked at—" Ghita winced—"did you by any chance notice a date scribbled on the bottom left-hand corner?"

"April the twenty-ninth," Ghita said promptly.

"Oh, thank heaven, thank heaven!" He sank like a falling pear on to Ghita's chair, fanning himself. "Miss Waring, you are a very remarkable girl. That was my wife's birthday. I absently jotted it on the plan instead of in my new diary. Miss Waring, you may have any job you care to name in Pickering and Pumphrey's. How about a desk in the main lobby, as Miss Memory, answering customers' inquiries?"

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Pumphrey," Ghita said. "Very, very kind of you indeed. But—" she looked at Roger and his expression made her eyes shine like dew-filled daffodils—"I'm going to devote myself to Augmented Triads from now on."

Joan Aiken 1959

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One likes the pheasant's wing, and one the leg;
The vulgar boil, the learned roast an egg.

ALEXANDER POPE

O breakfast! O breakfast! The meal of my heart!
Bring porridge, bring sausage, bring fish for a start,
Bring kidneys and mushrooms and partridges' legs,
But let the foundation be bacon and eggs—
Bacon and eggs,
Bacon and eggs;
Bring bacon,
Crisp bacon,
And let there be eggs!

A. P. HERBERT, *Bacon and Eggs*

Good Egg

In a low voice, he [Sir George Sitwell] confided in me: "You know, Osbert, I sometimes have an idea with money in it."

"Yes, Father."

"Well," he gave a long dry laugh like a cackle, "I've just produced an egg."

He waited a little to allow me to look astonished, which certainly I did—sufficiently, even, I think, to satisfy him.

Gratified, he continued, "It's a breakfast egg . . . The yolk will be made of smoked meat, the white of compressed rice, and the shell of synthetic lime—or a coating of lime. It will be delicious, will last for ever, and be ready at any time. It wouldn't matter where you might be, in the desert or on a polar expedition, all you'd have to do would be to boil it for two or three minutes, as you wished—and there would be your breakfast, ready for you, and very nourishing and sustaining. You'd feel wonderfully fit after it, ready to do a real hard day's work. It may make the whole difference to explorers!"

"What a good idea! You ought to patent it at once."

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"As a matter of fact, that's why I want to consult you. I would like to make a little money for Sachie after I am gone—but how am I to place my egg on the market? . . . I thought perhaps I'd see Selfridge's about it—they seem very go-ahead. But whom shall I ask for? I daren't trust my egg to anyone else—it might be stolen."

"I should ask for Mr. Gordon Selfridge himself. Tell the commissionaire to take you up in the lift, and just step into Mr. Selfridge's sanctum, saying, 'I'm Sir George Sitwell, and I've brought my egg with me!'"

"Capital idea! That is what I will do. Thank you so much, dear boy: I knew you would help me!"

OSBERT SITWELL, *Laughter in the Next Room*

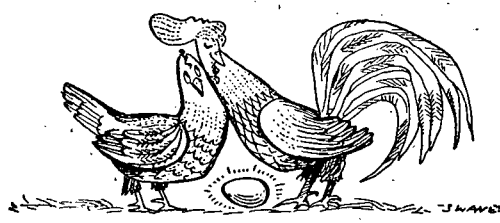
Ovation

Oh who that ever lived and loved
Can look upon an egg unmoved?
The egg it is the source of all.
'Tis everyone's ancestral hall.
The bravest chief that ever fought,
The lowest thief that e'er was caught,
The maiden's lips, the harlot's leg,
They one and all came from an egg.

The rocks that once by ocean's surge
Beheld the first of eggs emerge—
Obscure, defenceless, small and cold—
They little knew what eggs could hold.
The gifts the reverent Magi gave,
Pandora's box, Aladdin's cave,
Wars, loves and kingdoms, heaven and hell,
All lay within that tiny shell . . .

Then join me, gentlemen, I beg,
In honouring our friend the egg.

CLARENCE DAY, *Our Friend the Egg*



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Mad Scramble

People who had once tasted his scrambled eggs, so we gathered from his conversation, never cared for any other food afterwards, but pined away and died when they could not get them. . .

He had some trouble in breaking the eggs—or rather not so much trouble in breaking them exactly as in getting them into the frying-pan when broken, and keeping them off his trousers, and preventing them from running up his sleeve; but he fixed some half-a-dozen into the pan at last, and then squatted down by the side of the stove and chivied them about with a fork.

It seemed harassing work, so far as George and I could judge. Whenever he went near the pan he burned himself, and then he would drop everything and dance round the stove, flicking his fingers about and cursing the things. Indeed, every time George and I looked round at him he was sure to be performing this feat. We thought at first that it was a necessary part of the culinary arrangements.

We did not know what scrambled eggs were, and we fancied that it must be some Red Indian or Sandwich Islands' sort of dish that required dances and incantations for its proper cooking. . . . Altogether it was one of the most interesting and exciting operations I have ever witnessed. George and I were both quite sorry when it was over.

JEROME K. JEROME, *Three Men in a Boat*

Lay Sister!

Said a great Congregational preacher
To a hen, " You're a beautiful creature."
And the hen, just for that,
Laid an egg in his hat,
And thus did the Hen reward Beecher.

ANON

Yellow Peril

" It's very easy to talk," said Mrs. Mantalini.

" Not so easy when one is eating a demnition egg," replied Mr. Mantalini; " for the yolk runs down the waistcoat, and yolk of egg does not match any waistcoat but a yellow waistcoat, demmit."

CHARLES DICKENS, *Nicholas Nickleby*

Eggocentric

Better an egg today than a hen tomorrow.

Proverb

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REMEMBER SWEET HELEN

They were childishly happy to own a goldmine, however small

BY JOHN INGLIS HALL

AT my Great Aunt Cora's house, during the second year before the war, there had been Monsieur Xavier, Madame Dobosch, Monsieur Charles, and also Signor Giovanni, all in quick succession. Not lovers in the cases of the gentlemen, not a companion in the case of the lady, but chefs—and they had all been, for one reason or another, failures.

By no means austere, though officially at least opposed to sin, my Great Aunt Cora maintained at her huge house at Burnham End a magnificent table, even by prewar standards. But it had certainly been a very bad year for chefs. In spite of her large staff and the more than splendid conditions in which its members lived—for Aunt Cora believed in sharing the waning advantages of her late father's vast cotton fortune—they had none of them remained with her more than six weeks.

Monsieur Xavier, short and choleric, with a splendidly-hirsute, raised wart near the end of his nose, whose meals were conceived like a military operation and served with an authoritarian suddenness ill-suited to Aunt Cora's leisurely, untidy house parties, exploded when a kitchenmaid had thrown away the preciously-reduced, aromatic liquid prepared for a Béarnaise sauce.

Almost before the girl had recovered from the ringing box on the ears which he had given her, Monsieur Xavier had packed and utterly vanished. Madame Dobosch, dramatically Hungarian, who made strudels lighter than swansdown and sang Mozart arias as she worked, had fallen in love—most inexplicably—with Tichfield, my aunt's butler, who was already married to a solemn housemaid called Susan. So she had to go.

Monsieur Charles, thin, spare, and furtive as a weasel, had drunk a bottle of 1919 brandy one evening and was discovered after midnight shooting private, imagined rabbits in the billiard-room. And Signor Giovanni—the only one whom I never saw—was drowned boating on the ornamental lake.

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For me, a schoolboy in Aunt Cora's charge while my parents were in India, it had been a fascinating culinary year. The drama of Signor Giovanni's demise, alleged to have taken place at three in the morning—a very wet housemaid had been fished from the lake by a passing poacher, and dismissed on the following day—had filled me with a sense of the lively times in which we lived. It all came to me in Aunt Cora's letters, which were never less than ten pages long and contained a chronicle of all that happened at Burnham End between letter and letter, omitting nothing, even that which was scandalous and unedifying. She had a frighteningly-observant eye and believed that children should be told everything in order, as she said, to spare them some nasty shocks later on.

It was when I returned from school for the summer holidays and was lunching ceremonially with Aunt Cora at Claridges, where she had been staying since the fatal immersion of Signor Giovanni, that I first heard of Monsieur Joseph.

"My dear boy," Aunt Cora said in her tremendous, Edwardian, stage voice, signalling to the wine waiter with a raised imperious finger as she spoke, "it seems the man's a gem, a real gem. Cooked for half the peerage, probably the less respectable half, which is all to the good. Decorated by some Eastern potentate, I believe, for curry—though, Lord knows, I hate the stuff myself. Anyway, I hope the man's as good as he sounds; name of Joseph—not too fat, no red nose, and I think just too old for funny business with the girls, although one never knows, does one, dear?"

I said feebly, "No, one doesn't," though I had at that time little, if any, idea of what funny business with the girls might mean.

A week later, Monsieur Joseph arrived at Burnham End. He was a little, square, lively man of sixty odd: short and pink, with hair cut en brosse, and a good, firm, round stomach, neatly protruding.

I saw him through one of the kitchen windows on his first day, preparing dinner in his tall, white, chef's hat.

Sometimes he removed the hat for a moment and mopped his forehead with a blue-and-white spotted bandanna of vast size. A man who has been decorated by an Eastern potentate for curry is, after all, an important personage, so I was taking a good look at him.

Suddenly he noticed me, and gave me a tremendous smile; a smile of gaiety, amiability, and pleasure, glittering with red lips and porcelain. Then he walked quickly over to the window and flung it open.

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" Eh bien, my young monsieur," he cried with a strong French accent. " You are the son of the 'ouse, yes? "

As he spoke, suddenly and without taking his eyes from mine, he picked up a big brown egg from a glass dish on the scrubbed wooden table, threw it high in the air, almost, I remember, to the great central beam of the old kitchen with its two dead, gas brackets, caught it, and broke it into a small white basin—all, it seemed, in a single, lightning, rhythmic movement.

" You see, my young monsieur? A chef, he is a magician. You did not know that, eh, my young monsieur? " he said.

I shifted about on my feet, uneasily. I had still no earthly idea of how to deal with situations and people outside the common run of my experience. Besides, for me, chefs were still just cooks. There was no art in them, no intimations of their possible immortality.

" Well, no, I didn't," I said doubtfully, then brightened because suddenly I had thought of something sensible to say. " And I am not the son of the house, you know. I'm a great-nephew. My parents are in India, and I come to Lady Manderville's for the holidays."

" Ah! " Monsieur Joseph nodded. " India! Elephants, rajas, maharajas, jungles, dancing-girls, curry, popadams, saris, rice . . ." He paused reflectively. There was no reason why this list of the animals, princes, features, personalities, clothing, and foods of India should ever have ceased, but he stopped nevertheless. " They like it, your parents? Me, I do not. I 'ave been in India once, three years. I like better Penzance."

To me, a romantic of the last generation of subtly-doubting imperialists, belonging to a family permanently considering the comparative merits of Tibet, Constantinople, or the Upper Amazon for visits, holidays, or exploration, Penzance sounded a somewhat feeble substitute, but my schoolboy good manners forbade me to voice this opinion.

" I haven't been to India," I said.

" And Penzance? "

" Well no, not really. We did go once to Lamorna when I was about seven, but I don't remember it much," I said.

Monsieur Joseph picked up an egg-whisk and began, almost playfully, to beat the recently-levitated egg.

" Near Penzance I have a Roman goldmine," he announced casually. " I share it with a lady I know, Mrs. Blackmore. One day, I tell you all about it, if you promise it shall be a complete secret."

He winked.

I promised at once. I wanted instinctively some part in a

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Roman goldmine for myself, even if it had to be shared with a Monsieur Joseph and a Mrs. Blackmore.

"Good boy," said Monsieur Joseph. "Now, if you will permit, I continue your dinner. You will see. It will be magnificent, exquisite, perfect!" He emphasised the three words with little stabbing strokes of his index finger, laughing as he articulated them. You could not tell whether or not he was completely serious. Then he added, "Your aunt, Lady Cora, I think she will be amazed."

I left him, his face all smiles, happy in the certainty of giving pleasure in the exercise of his profession, like an adept concubine.

His dinner was, of course, masterly; my Aunt Cora used to quote it, so I know the menu and wines by heart, even at this distance in time. Tortue Clair with dry sherry, Filets de Sole Normande and a 1934 Chablis, Roast Pheasant Lucullus and a Romanée-Conti 1923, an Orange Bavaroise, delicately flavoured with Kirsch, and Veuve Clicquot 1929. Monsieur Joseph had evidently made an exceedingly competent tour of Aunt Cora's cellar with Tichfield as soon as he arrived. This delighted Aunt Cora, for there was in her not a suspicion of meanness; she was in fact a wildly prodigal woman, and appreciated instantly anyone of her own stamp.

When dinner was over and she had left the men to their port, she called me from the dining-room. Tichfield was just serving the ladies their coffee.

"Johnny, will you please go to Monsieur Joseph in the kitchen," she said, smiling at me. "D'you mind? I'd rather that than just ringing for him. Give him my compliments, and ask him would he be good enough to come and see me in the drawing-room. Speak to him respectfully, my dear boy. He is entitled to demand it."

It was these few phrases, this attitude of hers which made me, ever afterwards, place great cooks among the executant artists whose tunes fade as they play, whose performances vanish nightly into the air.

When I reached the kitchen, Monsieur Joseph, pink and spotlessly clean as ever, his face shining, was sitting before a small, silver tray with a white napkin on it, drinking a glass of Aunt Cora's Romanée-Conti. He was holding it up to the light as I came in, rhapsodising about its colour to an audience of one—himself. I felt shy, because I had never been asked to convey anybody's compliments to anybody else before, and blushed as I presented them.

Monsieur Joseph put down his glass and stood up, obviously

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delighted. " I shall be honoured. But one moment, monsieur," he said.

He went to the chef's cupboard and coquettishly, almost as if amused by his own punctiliousness, changed his white coat and high white hat for completely clean ones, glancing at himself in the mirror on the cupboard door as he did so. When he was satisfied with his appearance, he followed me to the drawing-room, dignified and joyful.

" You see, mon petit, the dinner, it was good, n'est-ce pas? " he said. " In fact, it was perfect," he added, still giving the impression of laughing at his own pretension and vanity. Then, in a small stage whisper as we reached the drawing-room door, " And your aunt, she is a great lady, and recognised it for what it was—a small masterpiece."

This I already knew.

Monsieur Joseph's performance in the drawing-room was worthy of an ambassador, my aunt's that of a Queen and a wit. They played up to one another, briefly but with perfect discernment, like actors on a halcyon evening in a play of quality.

My aunt opened the dialogue adroitly, her small, narrow, brilliantly-shining, brown eyes fixing his as a woman's eyes will fix those of a man, in whatever circumstances, and hold them to challenge and explore.

" Monsieur Joseph," she said, speaking in her elegant, choice French. " You have not always served dinners to honest people; that was a dinner for the boudoir, for the secret pavilion, for le rendez-vous galant. . ."

Monsieur Joseph bowed, smiled, then pursed his lips critically, considering for a moment what he should say; then, in the same gently bantering tone, " My lady places herself in a curious situation by recognising such a dinner so easily," he observed.

Laughter rippled in the room for a second, led by Aunt Cora. It was first blood to Monsieur Joseph. He held up his hand courteously for silence. " But then, a distinguished lady such as yourself would scarcely be discriminating did she not appreciate such matters," he added.

" Thank you, Monsieur Joseph," said my Aunt Cora dryly. " An artist in words, too, I see. But what do you say to my comment? I suspect that your opening was no more than the badinage of a man of the world."

I looked round at Aunt Cora and her four women guests, Lady Sowerby, Eileen Casson-Watts, Eugenie Duchesse D'Armorique, Sandra Maitland—all old, gay, greying friends of hers, witty, tolerant, and utterly at ease in the glow of Monsieur Joseph's marvellous dinner, whether it had been of a kind for honest folk

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or not. That they were all laughing, deep down in themselves, showed in their shrewd eyes. It was a joyful room, containing a delight that could be felt, and it communicated itself to Monsieur Joseph.

"Madame," he said, "a true artist wishes to shine, and be observed to shine by a few discriminating people. Certainly, I have cooked for gallant occasions, for what my lady has called the boudoir and the secret pavilion. Does she mind if, for her and these charming ladies, I also make my first dinner in her house such an occasion? A chef should never be indifferent to women, madame; even to his employer."

My Aunt Cora smiled at his delicately-emphatic avoidance of the word mistress; it was nothing more than a small point of interrogation between them, but quite delightful to watch. Then he added, "But this was, all the same, I think, a menu of character and delicacy, not necessarily, in my view, for an intimate occasion. But if my lady wishes I can be more austere in future."

"No, no, Monsieur Joseph. You are master in your own kitchen from now on," said Aunt Cora. "You are to do as you like. You tasted all the wines, of course?"

"Of course. They were beyond criticism, my lady. Also, the advice of Mr. Tichfield was invaluable to me with so short a time available before your dinner; a most interesting cellar, if I may be permitted to say so, madame."

"You certainly may," said Aunt Cora. "My late husband was responsible for the best of it. I learnt as he taught me. But now I know, too."

Monsieur Joseph inclined his head very slightly in acknowledgment of the death—which happened long ago—of my Great Uncle Hugh.

"Thank you, my lady, for having called me," he said. "Applause is still dear to me. It is perhaps a weakness; but at least I am ready to admit it."

"Not at all, Monsieur Joseph. Thank you for a brilliant performance," said Aunt Cora, smiling, and somehow managing to include in the phrase both the dinner and his conversation.

Monsieur Joseph backed out of the room, bowing, and the door closed quietly in front of him.

"A very fascinating, proud, and charming man," said Aunt Cora, turning to the company, obviously delighted. "A fantastic character—and a brilliant chef. But best of all is his soundness and sense of human dignity. He wouldn't allow me to get the better of him. I liked that."

Somehow, I sensed that what Aunt Cora had liked best about

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him might have pleased some of her more traditionalist friends least. I liked that, too.

So it was from that very first evening that Monsieur Joseph earned and assumed his place of honour at Burnham End. He kept it until he died.

It was not very long, however, before my Aunt Cora, making conversation, said to the company over lunch, " Joseph tells me he owns a Roman goldmine in Cornwall."

I started, because, by some kind of miracle, I had managed not to communicate to anybody Monsieur Joseph's secret. This was unusual.

" And he shares it with a Mrs. Blackmore," I now blurted out.

Aunt Cora put down her knife and fork gently on her plate, without a clink, without a sound, and looked round at me. " Well, indeed, Johnny! " she exclaimed. " But I thought it was a dead secret."

I shook my head.

" So it was," I said. " But I think Monsieur Joseph must be like me. Things he doesn't want to say just slip out somehow. You can't help it."

" Perhaps," said Aunt Cora, laughing. She thought for a moment, then added, " But, Mrs. Blackmore! So—he may not be too old for funny business with the girls after all!"

To this, as I have said before, I had at that time no valid comment to make. But I did wonder about Mrs. Blackmore, and the Roman goldmine that Monsieur Joseph was at the same time so anxious to protect and so ready to reveal.

It was extraordinary what a difference the presence of Monsieur Joseph made at Burnham End. The remainder of the staff were efficient, devoted, good-humoured; they liked the household, were not deeply at odds with one another, and respected Aunt Cora. There was everything there to make an equable, smoothly-agreeable house. You entered it as a haven of luxury and calm; authoritarian perhaps, but settled and delightful.

Tichfield, the master butler, was an efficient but totally-uninspired man of around fifty. Like Aunt Cora, he was representative of authority; but, unlike her, he radiated no aura of pleasure in the system which his efforts preserved. He had a nose which tilted right back, like the noses of the fabled Pavlovsky Guards in Imperial Russia. This gave him a remarkably supercilious look. I can recall nobody into whose character I could see further—merely by looking up his nose which, I remember, also contained tufts of short, black-and-white hairs.

During the six months or so of confusion when the general post

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among Aunt Cora's chefs was in progress, Tichfield sailed about as usual, deprecatory, calm, and helpful, but somehow regarding it all as outside his province. His function was to receive and induct the new chefs, set them about their business, and let them depart in peace or otherwise if they failed. He had been terribly embarrassed by the passionate attentions of Madame Dobosch, but his only personal action, as distinguished from the almost passive evasion of seeing that he was not left alone with her, was to inform Aunt Cora of his preference for her quick removal.

The other members of the household were of the same moderate stamp as Tichfield, orthodox, settled, and worthy, but without fire. This is probably desirable, in the last instance. A house pulsating all the time, and to excess, with passion and curious behaviour below stairs, would almost certainly be inefficient; but Burnham End, before the advent of Monsieur Joseph, while it did not really suffer from the lack of a leader, certainly did not possess one. He turned out to be one of that small international tribe whose mere presence in a house, or in a situation, or on an occasion, easy or difficult, provides a focal point from which orders and right action automatically tend to proceed.

Even the superior Tichfield, who might have been expected to sense that he had become only nominally head of the domestic hierarchy at Burnham End, found himself gently enmeshed in Monsieur Joseph's net of friendship, kindness, and mighty competence. He did not even struggle, but became very quickly intimate. Soon they were playing chess and smoking their pipes together almost every evening. After a short time I discovered that Tichfield had told Monsieur Joseph about the Dobosch incident, for I was not immune from the fascination of Monsieur Joseph—in fact the reverse—and he confided in me.

He told me about it, very amusingly, one evening when we were anchored aboard his aged cabin cruiser, the *Sweet Helen*, in Chichester Harbour. Monsieur Joseph, I soon discovered, loved the sea, his profession, and Mrs. Blackmore. I never knew precisely in which order.

He had bought his boat at the end of his three years with the Maharaja, who had given him a truly princely parting gift when he left his service. It had enabled him to buy *Sweet Helen*, and to pay a deposit on the cottage on the outskirts of Penzance, with the land on which the Roman goldmine stood. He owned them all now, completely, and took an immense pride in them. It was not long before my Aunt Cora knew about the boat; for one weekend every month he used to go down to Chichester by train to spend two days and nights on board the *Sweet Helen*. Soon Aunt Cora spoke lightly to people about my chef's yacht; and Monsieur

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Joseph knew of this. She always pleased him by her sense of irony.

During the holidays, with Aunt Cora's permission, I used sometimes to go down to the boat for a day. They were interludes of mingled ceremony and pure amusement.

Monsieur Joseph had a white, peaked yachting cap and a blue blazer. Rubicund in the sun and wind, he looked a potentate in this uniform, smoking his thin, black cheroots. Nobody from Burnham End was invited to the boat except me.

Monsieur Joseph handed me aboard himself from one of the jetties on to the spotlessly-scrubbed deck. Every piece of metal-work on board shone and glittered. Every polishable, visible part of the boat, whether the hull or inside the cabin with its two folding berths, mahogany table, and tiny but perfectly-equipped galley, was highly polished.

When I appeared with my rucksack on the jetty, he welcomed me always with raised arms and a loud ecstatic cry of "Ah!" as though I were the last person in the world he had expected to see. His brief, unreal, but delicate pretence of surprise added charm to his welcome. Then, out would come a big, long-fingered, powerful, capable hand. I would seize it and jump down beside him.

A moment later, he would cry, "Hélène! Hélène! Imagine it, we have a visitor!"

Out from the cabin would come the pretty, untidy, blonde head of Helen Blackmore, with whom Monsieur Joseph shared his cottage in Cornwall, his Roman goldmine, and his boat—in fact, his life. Of course, she knew all about my coming and had for days but, because Monsieur Joseph loved surprises, she had created in herself the habit of being surprised to exactly the right degree about anything and everything.

There was something touchingly complete about Monsieur Joseph's relationship with Mrs. Blackmore. Neither of them ever explained to me why they were not man and wife, or indeed whether they were, in fact, man and wife. I never found out about it until they were both dead.

Only once, the first time I was on board the *Sweet Helen*, was the subject mentioned to me by either of them—even indirectly. Helen Blackmore said to me over her shoulder while she cooked our supper, and Monsieur Joseph was ashore getting some bottles of cold beer, "I think Monsieur Joseph would prefer you not to say anything at home about me living down here on the boat, Mr. Johnny. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," I said. "I'll say nothing at all to anyone."

"Good," she said. "He won't mention it to you, because we

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agreed that I should speak to you. That's really why he went to fetch the beer."

"Of course," I said. This marked the first time in my life that I completely respected a confidence, and I believe that Aunt Cora may never have known that Helen Blackmore lived on the boat when she was not in Cornwall.

Monsieur Joseph himself sometimes spoke archly and amusingly about his "one man crew" to Aunt Cora, as though it was some young sailor whom he hired to work for him.

Their relationship, however, was in one sense quite obvious. It was clear that they adored each other, visibly and openly, in spite of a difference of more than twenty years in their ages. Helen Blackmore was about thirty, large-eyed, graceful, and pretty, as well as being a very capable woman. She was a cook in her way as perfect as Monsieur Joseph.

When he was in the boat, it was a convention that he never cooked, but treated her as the brilliant performer, the wifely cordon bleu, the idol of a humdrum, hard-working husband in his hours of ease. Ashore, they danced together, rather well, sometimes got a little tipsy, and were always surrounded by people who evidently thought Monsieur Joseph was a great swell, incognito. So he was, in my view.

Sometimes, when I visited them on the boat, they talked to me about the Roman goldmine. One day Monsieur Joseph said to me, "You remember, I spoke to you the first day we met about our goldmine, yes? Good!"

He took Helen's hand in his across the table in the cabin.

"You see our rings? The gold comes from it. It could not possibly be exploited commercially, but we and a few friends mine from it a little gold each year. It is nice, isn't it? What you have dug for yourself, won for yourself, is particularly beautiful."

He passed me the rings to look at. Each one had on it, on the inside, the other partner's name, and what I recognised as the Latin inscription from the rim of an ancient coin: *Anno regni III decus et tutamen—In the third year of his reign; adornment and protector.*

"You see, we got our first gold from the mine the third year after we met," said Helen Blackmore. "So we had the rings made. The motto's from the old, five-shilling pieces. Now, every little while we make something new. The case of Joseph's watch is Cornish gold; so is this chain of mine."

They were childishly happy to own a goldmine, however small; as happy as I was to talk about it. I used to come away from my visits to the *Sweet Helen* consoled and at peace with the world. This delighted Aunt Cora.

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Over the luncheon table, I often caught her looking at me intently and sadly, and I did not grasp at once why it was that she had become of a sudden warmer, gentler, and mellower than I had known her before. Monsieur Joseph remained all that time strong and firm, keeping the sentiment of the house quiet and determined. He would have nobody anxious, but equally, nobody must yield.

"If there is war," I remember him saying, "we shall be fighting, as before, for our lives and liberty. I have my medals from the 1914 war. For the one that is coming, I am too old. That may be for you, Monsieur Johnny. I hope not, but if it is, it is unprofitable to fear it."

When the war in fact came, Monsieur Joseph, with Aunt Cora's permission, organised the village fire service, helped her cut the staff at Burnham End, and partially close the house. He became more and more a friend of the family as the first months dragged on, slowly, ingloriously, and indecisively.

At the time of Dunkirk, I was at school. Aunt Cora told me how, at the critical time, he came to her suddenly one evening, looking like a young man, as she put it. She asked him to sit down with her in the drawing-room where he had received her first congratulations.

He bowed, gallant as ever, but remained standing, and explained to her that as a French speaker he had been asked to go for a week on a special mission. She would understand, he must beg her to be so good as to ask no questions, and nobody in the village must know that he had gone.

Aunt Cora told me she did not guess at all the nature of his mission. He told her in fact nothing, save that it might take a week.

She asked him one question, tentatively, without curiosity, as having to do with what was, for her, a theoretical personage, an abstraction.

"Monsieur Joseph, forgive me for asking," she said. "There is, I believe, a Mrs. Blackmore . . ."

He was touched, and kissed her hand.

"Thank you, my lady," he said. "She is provided for, but my profoundest thanks, all the same."

They said good-bye.

That evening, both Tichfield and he vanished; nobody in the village or in the house knew, save for Aunt Cora and Tichfield's tearful, solemn Susan. They went with the *Sweet Helen* to the beaches of Dunkirk, and managed one trip, but from the second they did not return.

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Helen Blackmore went with them; but that we discovered some time afterwards.

Aunt Cora put up a memorial tablet to the three of them in Burnham End church, nobly and touchingly phrased, praising the devotion to us all of:

Helen May Blackmore, Joseph Lemaître
and Albert Tichfield
who vanished before Dunkirk
with the cabin cruiser, Sweet Helen

There was also a letter to me from Monsieur Joseph, which he left with Aunt Cora, willing to me the cottage in Cornwall and the Roman goldmine, with the hope that from it would come the gold for the wedding rings of myself, my children, and my children's children.

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TALK OF THE TOWN

Whether yours is a West End flat or a little grey home in the west, town and town about is fair play, so take a turn through our borough. Seven out of seven without recourse to the street guide on page 103 and you're city pretty.

1. *Which are the Five Towns?*
2. *Which city did a. Hopkins refer to as towery, and branchy between towers; b. Pope call "Dear, damn'd, distracting town?"*
3. *Under what other names do these boroughs bloom:*
   a. Auld Reekie
   b. Pompey
   c. The Smoke?
4. *Which seaport is a. built inside an Emperor's palace; b. alleged to be the bride of the sea?*
5. *In what cities or towns will you find a. the Village; b. the Ring; c. the Land of Green Ginger; d. Phoenix Park; e. the Eiffel Tower?*
6. *Which city was a. built on seven hills though not in a day; b. buried under three other cities and on top of five more?*
7. *Can you complete:*
   a. "In ——'s fair city, Where the girls are so pretty"
   b. "—— town's in Brunswick"
   c. "Sweet ——, loveliest village of the plain"
   d. "A Town like ——"

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HANDS

Slender fingers stretched upwards,
the two thumbs just touching in the centre

BY ANDREW GRAHAM

I LOOKED searchingly at Albert's angry young pug face so as to observe his reaction. "Fundamentally, it's hands you're interested in, isn't it? Hands."

The effect was instantaneous. Albert Smith blushed—I sensed that he was blushing all over—he smiled a slow, relaxed smile and his whole face lit up.

"You must be amazingly observant," he said.

Before going out to Saigon a few years ago, I spent some days' leave at home in the country and, at my family's earnest request, I went to call on the widow Smith who lived in a small house called The Chestnuts, near the village church.

There was nothing remarkable about Mrs. Smith. Her husband, a very junior officer in the Indian army, had been killed in a frontier incident twenty years ago, and she had devoted her life and nearly all her tiny income to the upbringing of Albert, her only child.

And he was doing so well, she said. His godfather had got him this wonderful job with Osborn and Snathely—the shipping people, you know—and they'd sent him out almost immediately to their office in Phairong. Wasn't it wonderful, she said, because he was only twenty-one.

I said I thought it was splendid.

And now I was going to Indo-China, too, so I'd be seeing him, and oh, if I could spare the time she'd so love a letter about him. Somehow she found it difficult to visualise his life out there.

I said I'd do what I could.

Then—and it gave her such happiness—she showed me her photograph album.

Albert as a baby. No comment.

Albert from behind, paddling.

Albert wearing the blazer and cap of his private school. Here—it came over me with a great gust of inner laughter—the resemblance to the children in Giles' immortal cartoons started

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to emerge. There was that magnificently squat disproportion about him, and that look of mature wickedness.

Albert, more than ever like a Giles child, sitting in the middle of his school soccer team, gripping a ball with pudgy hands.

"He was always mad keen on games," said Mrs. Smith.

"Jolly good, being captain of the team," I said.

Albert scowling under the peak of a cricket cap.

And finally, the last term at school, Albert, Victor Ludorum, holding a monstrous great silver cup and leering from ear to ear.

"I'm so proud of him," said Mrs. Smith, as she shut the book. "He's everything in the world to me."

"I'll make a point of going to see him," I said.

In practice I saw Albert on only four occasions. Phairong is over a thousand miles from Saigon, where I was living, and I didn't have to go there very often.

The first time was soon after I arrived in Indo-China. I flew to Hanoi and drove down. A somewhat dour Mr. and Mrs. McCrimmon put me up for the night. Mr. McCrimmon had a heavy moustache and a brass-bound family Bible. He was manager of the British shipping company and, incidentally, Albert's boss. He didn't seem to think much of Albert.

"He's queer," said Mr. McCrimmon, putting a great many e's and r's into the word; and I wondered exactly what I was meant to understand. I was soon enlightened.

"I think," said Mr. McCrimmon, frowning a sort of hell-and-damnation frown, "mind you, I'm not sure—but I think he's carrying on with a native girrl; and that's verra bad for British prestige."

Really, Mr. McCrimmon! I thought to myself, this is not a suburb of Aberdeen.

Here you have, on the one hand, a lusty boy straight from school, on his own for the first time and in a very hot climate; and on the other, any number of the most seductive little houris, born and brought up for the pleasures of the bed and, incidentally —dammit Mr. McCrimmon—Tonkin has been a French protectorate for a long time now—fully accustomed to making Europeans feel at home.

"Oh," I said. I couldn't think of anything better to say.

"Aye," said Mr. McCrimmon, "he's a queer unsociable laddie, and I suspect there's a girrl at the bottom of it."

After dinner I set out in a pedal rickshaw to call on Albert. We creaked and jiggled over the pavé streets with the scrawny old coolie's knees pumping up and down like pistons just behind my head and the rickshaw light twinkling at my side.

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The night air was hot and heavy, the streets were ill-lit. It seemed, judging mostly by the smells, to be an oddly sordid area for a European to choose.

The rickshaw stopped somewhere in the middle of a row of meanish, one-storey stucco houses and I got down and paid the fare. The coolie pedalled slowly away, keening softly to himself.

I rang the bell. After a short pause, lights came on on either side of the door, and I noticed they were in lanterns such as one sees on pony-carts in Tonkin, the base of the lantern being held by a wizened little brass hand.

Then Albert opened the door, and I introduced myself. I didn't like the way he shook hands. There was something unpleasantly intimate about it. He went on gripping much too long and he held my hand uncomfortably tight. He led me into the sitting-room and switched on the ceiling-fan. He was dressed in a singlet and shorts, and he was sweating freely. However, in that climate, if one does anything much except sit still under the fan sipping an iced drink, one does sweat freely.

It was a beastly little room and, moreover, it smelt, smelt strongly; not only of Albert, but of Albert blended with joss sticks.

Not prepossessing.

I lit a cigarette. "I thought you might like to give me a drink," I said.

"I'm afraid I don't keep any liquor, but I can give you a glass of lemonade."

"That'd be fine," I said.

I watched him, not without a certain horrid fascination, as he walked over to the sideboard. I've never seen anybody quite so thick: physically thick in every direction. He had an immensely thick neck which would have looked magnificent on a better-proportioned man. He was thick, though not broad, in the shoulder, and his legs would have supported a billiard-table.

Mentally I sought for a word to describe him. Chunky? Humpy? No, that wasn't fair. There was nothing humped or hunched about him, but there was a u-sound somewhere in the word I wanted. Stunted, perhaps, was nearer. And then I got it. Runt was the word I was looking for. A runt to end all runts. A prize specimen. Runtus runtissimus.

He put the lemonade on the table beside me, and it was then that I noticed his hands. They were broad and pudgy, and the fingers were noticeably, abnormally, short. Any amount of care had patently been given to his nails. They were sharply pointed and revoltingly highly polished, and the tips looked as if they had been artificially whitened.

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He sat down. I gave him messages from his mother, and asked him about himself. He seemed a confident sort of fellow, sure of himself, cocksure perhaps.

"We start work at seven," he said, "and go on till noon. Then we break till three and work again till six, or later if one of our ships is in port."

"And what d'you do in the evening, after work? Have you made any friends?"

No, apparently he hadn't made any real friends. What he usually did was to have supper early and then put in an hour or two with the weights.

"Weight-lifting, d'you mean?"

"Yes," and his eyes glinted. "I'm tremendously strong," he said. "Just feel that." He extended a thick, sweaty arm in my direction and moved a muscle like a pumpkin up and down.

I didn't want to be unfriendly. I wanted to be kind. With considerable distaste, I felt it. "Absolutely magnificent," I said.

"You don't look very strong," he said.

"Oh, I rub along, you know," I said. "I rub along."

And all the time, though the ceiling-fan churned it up a bit, we were sitting in this stinking atmosphere of sweaty Albert and joss sticks. It was really very nasty.

"Why d'you burn joss sticks?"

"They're on my altar," he said. "Would you like to see it?"

We went through a bamboo curtain into his bedroom. The smell was as before, but now it was nauseatingly thick. There was his bed with its hard bolster-pillow; on the floor was the weight-lifting apparatus; and in the corner was an altar such as one may see in many houses in Indo-China, where the cult is the simple, primeval worship of the ancestors.

There were candles burning, a plate of rice cakes, a plate of fruit, two little vases of flowers, and a sort of tin in which the joss sticks were smouldering. I looked at the vases again. Victorian English, surely. Cornucopias held by slender, miniature hands, each with a lace cuff and a ring, in quite good white china. What were they doing in Phairong? Had Albert brought them out from England?

I could only suppose that he had found the altar more or less like this when he took the house, but I thought it was in very dubious taste for him, a Christian European, to fool about with it in this way.

"Is that a landlord's fixture?" I said.

"Oh no," he said, and he smiled a patronising smile. "It's mine. You see, I've found the Truth. I'm a disciple of Kai-Lao."

Kai-Lao, I said to myself, now what have I heard about him?

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In Indo-China at that time—it may be the same now, for all I know—quasi-religious sects abounded. That steamy soil, saturated by centuries of superstition, made an excellent hotbed for them, and they in their turn provided good cover for less savoury activities.

Of Kai-Lao I could remember little except that he posed as a faith-healer and general miracle-man. Certainly that was the cover story, but I couldn't remember what it was supposed to cover. I knew I'd seen a rather highly-coloured intelligence report on him somewhere.

And, meanwhile, here was this boy, this cocky little runt at my side, taken in by a hokey-pokey holy man like that.

Oh, my good Albert, I felt like saying, you've got a mother and she lives at The Chestnuts. I can't recall which public school you went to, but I do remember that it was the most reputable academy. Surely you had a housemaster, Albert, and a headmaster? And there must have been a late Victorian-Gothic chapel. Surely, Albert, surely? Didn't any of these amenities bite deeper into you than this?

I knew that nothing I could say, as a layman, would do any good. What was needed was a priest, and a corking good priest at that: one of those absolutely unanswerable old boys who do turn up occasionally and put people back on the lines.

"But, Albert," I said, and then stopped short, partly because I didn't know what to say, and partly, now that my eyes had become accustomed to the candlelight, because I had spotted on the wall behind the altar the most exquisite drawing in Chinese red on parchment. It represented a pair of hands with slender fingers stretching upwards, and the two thumbs just touching in the centre. Each tiny line on the palms was most lovingly and faithfully delineated.

They were essentially oriental and essentially feminine hands, such as I have seen in India, and indeed farther East. The Laotian court-dancers have hands like that. Fantastically flexible hands, that can express almost any sensual subtlety.

"What is that drawing?" I said.

"The healing hands," he said. "They're symbolical of Kai-Lao."

I must have looked puzzled. "But they're a woman's hands," I said. There was a moment of uneasiness.

"Are they?" he said. "I wouldn't know."

Then, with enthusiasm, he went on, "That's how I first came into contact with Kai-Lao. I had the most excruciating pain, here in my back. I thought I'd just ricked a muscle, but it went on for weeks and nothing seemed to do it any good. And then—"

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he stared, almost as if mesmerised, at the picture of the hands—"then I went to Kai-Lao and he just touched the place. Oh, it was wonderful! I can't describe it. I felt the pain melt away."

M'm, I thought to myself, I've heard that one before. But it's a lovely drawing.

"What does his religion consist of?" I said. "Would you like to talk about it, or would you rather not?"

"Well, of course, I'm only a beginner, but I'd do anything for him. He asks you to do simple acts of abstinence, of self-denial, for his sake, and then as you grow stronger you learn to give up worldly things."

"Is that why you don't drink?"

"I don't drink or smoke, and I give the money I save to him."

"Oh."

"And then it was through him that I first met Hieng. She's a disciple, too."

"Who's Hieng?"

"She's an orphan. Kai-Lao adopted her when she was a baby. She's a métisse: her father was a Frenchman, and her mother Tonkinese."

I didn't want to hear any more. I needed fresh air. I wanted to get away from Albert with his joss sticks and his physical culture apparatus and his wenching and his phoney self-denial.

As I left, I saw Hieng waiting in the shadow just outside the house. At least, I supposed it was she. She brushed against my sleeve. She smelt strongly of Soir de Paris and, as I passed, she turned her faultless, oval face towards me in the soft lamplight and made the most engaging little moue.

I wrote to Mrs. Smith because I had said I would write to her. I forget what I said. I expect I was pretty non-committal.

The second time I saw Albert was when he came down to Saigon for a week's leave. I had taken tickets for a charity concert at the Municipal Theatre, and I gave a little dinner-party first. The other guests were two jolly girls from the British Legation and a perfectly charming young couple from the American Embassy, the sort of big-hearted people who, I knew, would be able to take Albert in their stride.

Albert arrived last. I got up to greet him as he came in and I was relieved to notice how much less awful he looked in a white dinner-jacket than when I had seen him before.

He squeezed my hand, and then I watched the reactions of the other guests as I introduced him. One of the girls seemed rather to enjoy having her hand squeezed.

Dinner passed off easily, though I realised that, with the help

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of a martini and a glass or two of dry champagne, we were laughing perceptibly louder than Albert, who drank iced water.

At the theatre we sat in the front row of the dress-circle, which had been partitioned into little boxes with six chairs in each. I put Albert in front between the English girls, and myself between the two Americans behind. Albert, rather surprisingly, produced a pair of opera glasses.

The orchestra took their places, the conductor and the solo pianist were given their ovations, and the lights lowered.

Sitting a step above Albert, and just behind him, I could follow his line of sight exactly, and I noticed that throughout the whole of the piano concerto, with which the concert opened, he sat forward, resting his elbows on the balcony-rail and never taking his opera glasses off the pianist's hands. He sat tense and still, almost as if entranced.

I remember thinking that it was probably rather an intelligent thing to do. I had never thought of taking opera glasses to a concert and actually observing the technique of the hands that were making the music. Like seeing a close-up photograph, I supposed.

I didn't think much more about it at the time. I was relieved that the evening was nearly over, that I had only got to have my hand squeezed once more, when we said good night, and then my duty would be done. But I suppose subconsciously I put the impression away in the mental file marked *Albert.*

I didn't see him for nearly a year, until I was again spending a night with the McCrimmons.

I found a note awaiting me: *Could you possibly come round after dinner tonight? I've got so much I want to say to you. I want your advice. Albert.*

So after dinner I went jiggling round again over the pavé to that sordid little house. I saw Albert waiting for me on the doorstep. He was lighting one cigarette from the butt of another, and when I shook hands I noticed that his fingers were stained brown with nicotine. He was slightly but definitely drunk.

I thought to myself, These are hopeful signs. He must have given up that hokey-pokey if he's smoking and drinking again.

We went in and sat down. No smell of sweat, no joss sticks. He gave me a whisky and soda, and then the nightmare began.

He was obviously very overwrought and all his cocky self-assurance was gone. The pain in his back had started nagging again. It was always there till he had had a drink or two, and then he didn't seem to notice it so much. He had found out all about Kai-Lao; found out that he wasn't a holy man at all, but "juzz another crook."

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"Bloody old Kai-Lao," said Albert, with a laugh like a hyena's.

He poured himself another drink. "Juzz another crook. I'm all washed up with him and I'm going to tell that bloody Hieng when she comes tonight that I'm all washed up with her, too. Bunch of crooks, that's what they are."

He paused, examined the nails of his left hand, breathed on them, and then started polishing them on the cuff of his coat. He belched, apologised, and offered me another drink.

I helped myself to some ice and soda-water. I wished very much that I hadn't been there, but since I was there I had better be sober.

We sat for a moment in silence with the fan slowly turning in the ceiling, and then, before he could start again, I made the remark with which this account of my relations with Albert opens. "Fundamentally," I said, "it's hands you're interested in, isn't it? Hands." I had opened a floodgate. Out it all poured.

Had I noticed old McCrimmon's hands? Brown and strong and well-nourished and fleshy: the hands of a sensualist. That's what old McCrimmon was, under all his hymn-singing and prayer-reading with Mrs. Mac. A sensualist, that's what he was. And his housemaster's hands at school: the dry, greyish hands of an ascetic: uncomfortable, unsatisfied hands. And the warped hands of a murderer. He had gone up to London in the holidays once, specially to see the hands of a man who was on trial for his life. And the gentle hands of a French girl on the boat coming out. He had thought that they were stretched out to help him, to offer some relief from a yearning which he only partly understood. But when he had tried to take those hands in his, she had laughed at him and turned away.

"Laughed!" he said. "She laughed at me," and again he made that awful noise like a hyena.

Then he spoke of the concert to which I had taken him in Saigon, of the supple hands of the pianist, with their broad, sensitive fingertips.

Then of the caressing hands with tiny, thin bones of a Chinese girl in Singapore—the first woman he'd ever slept with.

And now, all around him here in Tonkin—he saw them most vividly when his back hurt him early in the morning—the fragile, golden hands of the Tonkinese girls, fluttering like tulip petals, or sometimes he thought they were like flames.

I was right out of my depth. I had no idea what to say or do. "And that drawing I saw behind your—your altar," I said. "Whose hands are those?"

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"They're Hieng's," he said. "They're the loveliest hands I've ever seen. The drawing was made by an old Chinese artist in Hanoi. I felt when I saw those hands that I'd got to possess them, to dominate them. Otherwise, I knew—I can't tell you how I knew—that I should have to submit to them passively. I couldn't offer any resistance to those hands."

The look of elation faded from his eyes. "And now I'm all washed up," he said. "When Hieng comes tonight I'm going to tell her I'm all washed up."

He began to cry: not noisily, but helplessly, the tears rolling down his pudgy cheeks.

I got up. I walked across and thumped him on his thick shoulder. "Good night, Albert," I said. "I'll come and see you again tomorrow morning."

As I walked back to the McCrimmons' through the hot, still, dimly-lit streets with no sound other than my own footfall, the sudden chatter of cicadas in the trees, and the occasional howl of a wakeful dog, I remembered that note he had sent to me. What had he really wanted to talk about? Was he in even worse trouble than he appeared to be? And not unnaturally, it was this that worried me most—what ought *I* to do?

I was woken next morning at half past five by the telephone ringing and by a servant coming to fetch me to answer it.

"It's the British Consul," said a voice at the other end of the line. "I want to see you immediately."

"All right," I said, "can you send your car?"

"I've sent it," said the Consul, and rang off.

In ten minutes I was in his office.

"Am I right in thinking," he said, "that you called on young Smith last night?"

"I did."

"Then you're probably the last person but one to have seen him alive."

We looked at each other for a moment.

"Suicide?" I said.

"No. Murder. My houseboy told me when he came to work this morning."

"How did he know?"

"My dear chap, you tell me how they know these things. They hear them on the bush-telegraph, what the French call Radio Bambou."

"What d'you want me to do?"

"You know his mother, don't you?"

"Yes."

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"I want you to write to her and tell her that he died of snake-bite. It was all over in about half an hour. The doctor rushed to his house and did everything he could, but it was too late. I've already sent her a cable to that effect."

"Don't you have to get a death-certificate before you can bury him?"

"I can fix that. You have to have the funeral the same day in this climate. I'll try to get it laid on for eleven o'clock."

"What about McCrimmon?"

"McCrimmon can come to the funeral. He won't miss him for another couple of hours. Then I'll ring up and tell him there's nothing for him to do."

He rang the bell and gave orders in a mixture of Annamese and pidgin French to his clerk.

This was the paper for Monsieur le médecin to sign. This was the envelope to be given to Monsieur le médecin when he had affixed his signature. This was the order to be given to the undertaker.

The clerk was to speak to nobody else about this matter till the Consul returned.

"And now," he said, turning to me, "I'd better go and see the body. You wouldn't—" he hesitated—"you wouldn't come with me, I suppose?"

I thought, What a very human thing to ask.

"Why, surely," I said, "surely, I'll come."

He and I got into the car. We left the chauffeur behind.

"Tell me," I said, as we rattled through the streets, dodging in between little pony-carts and peasants in coolie hats loping along with swinging panniers in the bright, slanting sunshine, "tell me why you want me to compound this felony or whatever you call it. Don't think I have any qualms of conscience or any rot like that—but why?"

"My dear chap," said the Consul, "I cannot tell you what a happy ending this murder is. Don't let's go and spoil it. How well did you know Smith?"

"Seen him two or three times."

"Then I don't suppose you realise what a mess he was in."

"In what way?"

"Damn nearly every way," said the Consul. "It could only have been a matter of days, or weeks at the very most, before the police got on to him; and then heaven knows what might have come out. Everything was wrong about that boy. To start with, he was involved with Kai-Lao and his gang—and I could tell you a tasty detail or two about Kai-Lao if you're interested. D'you know how he usually gets rid of people he doesn't like? Buries

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'em alive up to the head, and ploughs them in slowly—with oxen."

"I haven't had breakfast," I said.

"Sorry," said the Consul, "but anyhow Smith was in with him. I take it you know what that implies?"

"No."

"Poppies."

"Poppies?"

"Yes. Opium. They grow stacks of it, you know, round Xieng Khouang and Phong Saly. Of course, a lot goes straight over the frontier into China; but a lot more comes out through the port here, mostly to Macao and Hong Kong. It suited them very well to have an Englishman in a shipping company on their pay roll."

"D'you suppose Albert knew what he was doing?"

"Not at first. I think he found out about six weeks ago; and then it was too late to pull out. That's when he started on the bottle.

"Of course, they were watching him all the time. He was always shadowed by day, and one of their most glamorous little numbers saw that he came to no harm by night."

"D'you know her?" I asked. "She was called Hieng."

"I know her by reputation," said the Consul. "She killed a Foreign Legionary about two years ago, just after I arrived—great hulking ox of a man. My German colleague had to deal with that one."

He paused.

Then, "I don't know," he said. "I'm only putting two and two together; but I reckon they must have thought Smith was becoming a bad risk, so they decided to get rid of him."

"But—" I said, and I spoke diffidently because I knew how easy it was to be wise after the event—"couldn't something have been done? Didn't old McCrimmon realise what was going on?"

The Consul shrugged his shoulders. "I did what I could," he said. "I told McCrimmon what I suspected six months ago, but—I don't know how you find him—I always feel as if I were talking to a horse in blinkers. He just can't see what's happening right close up to his eyes."

We drove on in silence, and I thought of The Chestnuts nestling in the shade of the village church. I thought of Mr. McCrimmon and his "verra bad for British prestige."

"I'll settle for a snake-bite," I said.

We left the car about a couple of hundred yards from Albert's house and let ourselves in by the back door, into the kitchen where the remains of last night's supper, now crawling with

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flies, was congealed on plates on the table. A great, overfed rat quizzed us for a moment, and then scuttled away down a sluice.

With the Consul leading, we went through into the bedroom. The slatted shutters were still closed, a ceiling-fan was creaking round and round and round, and a bedside lamp with a pink silk shade was still burning. There were two wall-lizards, motionless, just above the bed.

On the bed, lying on his back, with arms folded over his chest, was the naked body of Albert.

And that was the fourth and last time that I saw him.

His neck, that great, thick neck which would have looked so magnificent on a better-proportioned man, had been stretched taut, strained to its utmost, over the hard bolster. The head had been forced back so far that his chin, which was by now stubbly, stuck straight up in the air.

On the neck, right into the hard, white flesh of it, and printed with photographic exactitude in livid red, was the impression of a pair of essentially feminine, essentially oriental hands, with slender fingers stretching upwards, and the two thumbs just touching in the centre.

I don't know how long I stood looking at it, with Albert's thick voice echoing in my brain: "I can't tell you how I know, but I should have to submit to them passively. I couldn't offer any resistance to those hands."

I was brought back to reality by the sound of the Consul being violently sick in the yard outside.

I tiptoed across to the altar in the corner, removed the drawing which hung behind it, rolled it up, and slipped it inside my coat.

I wrote to Mrs. Smith, but she never read my letter. She was found by the Rector when he came to deliver the parish magazine, sitting where she had fallen, just inside the front door, clutching a cable from Phairong and muttering meaningless words to herself. Mercifully—because she never recovered her sanity—she died three months later.

She had been so proud of Albert. He had, as she had told me, been everything in the world to her.

I came upon the drawing only the other day, when I was looking through a folder of old Far Eastern things.

It still smells faintly of joss sticks. © Andrew Graham 1959

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KENDREW'S PRIVATE WAR

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

WHEN a young man like Constable Kendrew expressed ambitions to become a detective, he was apt to be suspected by his superiors of scrimshanking, and by his fellow constables of having a swollen head. None of this deterred Kendrew, who had clear ideas of where he was going.

The final decision in such a matter did not lie with Petrella, who was only the Station Detective Inspector at Gabriel Street. But his recommendation carried weight.

" He's very young," said Petrella, " and a bit too sure of himself. Doesn't take advice easily. And too fond of ploughing a lonely furrow. All the same—"

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" All the same," said Superintendent Benjamin, who controlled the C.I.D. activities of X Division, " you think he'll make a good detective."

" Yes," said Petrella, " I think he might."

" Then we'll put his name forward," said Benjamin. He was a tactful man, and would not have dreamt of mentioning that this was, almost word for word, the report that Superintendent Haxtell had made to him about Petrella when Petrella had joined X Division.

" I'll put him under Sergeant Croft," said Petrella. " He'll soon find out that being a detective isn't all beer and skittles."

Sergeant Croft was a married man, elderly as members of the C.I.D. go, past hope of further promotion, and without illusions —in two months he had nearly succeeded in disillusioning Kendrew, too.

" It seems to be all filling in forms," said Kendrew. " Don't we ever get any action? "

" Action? " said Sergeant Croft. " What do you want action for? Keep your weight off your feet, that's what I tell you youngsters. Close tonight, isn't it? "

They were walking home together. It was past midnight, but the detective staff of X Division kept no sort of hours.

" Feels like thunder," said Kendrew. " Don't you ever have any excitement? "

" You seen that scar on my forehead? " said Croft. " I got that when I was young and foolish. Arresting an armed man."

" Shot at you, eh? "

" What happened, he pointed this gun at me and I said, ' Put it down, it won't do you no good shooting me.' And he said, ' Oh, won't it just? ' and pulled the trigger. Luckily he'd forgotten to load it."

" But how—? "

" Then he threw the gun at me. Well, I turn off here. Good night."

" Goo' night," said Kendrew.

He did not make at once for his own lodging. His attic bedroom held few attractions for him. He sat down on the coping of the wall which ran round the playground of the South Borough Primary School, and let his thoughts run free.

He thought about Sergeant Croft, who had a multitude of faults, but one cardinal virtue; he was not a bully, and in his short life Kendrew had met bullies. But wasn't he old-fashioned! He, Kendrew, would soon outstrip Sergeant Croft. He would be a Detective Inspector like Petrella, or even a Superintendent like Benjamin. Let them but give him a chance.

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There was a car in the distance, being driven hard.

The trouble with the system, thought Kendrew, grinding his heel against the brickwork of the wall, was that all the credit tended to be given— Hullo, hullo, the car was coming in his direction.

It came up the hill, travelling dark, without lights.

Kendrew jerked out a torch, stepped into the road, and waved it. The car was almost on top of him. "He's not going to stop." As Kendrew's mind registered this message, he jumped to one side.

The car went past him, rocketing like a spinning-top. There was a tiny explosion. Sharp splinters spattered into his face.

Then the car, brakes squealing, swung into a left turn, following the road that Sergeant Croft had taken. The roar of the engine receded.

Kendrew found that there was blood on his face, and that his hand was shaking.

He turned his torch on the pavement. The car, swerving past the lamp-post, had hit it with its driving mirror. It was glass from the broken mirror which had flown into his face.

He pulled himself together and started to run. It was a futile sort of gesture, for the car was already a hundred yards away, and gathering speed. Ahead of him he saw a light flashing, heard a shout; then a crash, followed by a thud. The noise of the engines checked for a moment, before gathering speed again.

Kendrew ran on. He was feeling sick now, as well.

In the roadway, almost outside his own front door, he found Sergeant Croft. One glance in the light of his torch was enough. The car had gone over him.

Kendrew went down on one knee, steadying the torch by an effort of will. A deep silence had followed the passing of the car. Sergeant Croft was whispering something. Kendrew bent his head to listen. Then he realised that Sergeant Croft was saying his wife's name, over and over.

After a few seconds this stopped, too.

At the end of three days—during which London continued to swelter under skies of metallic blue, and the mercury in the thermometer climbed to unheard-of heights—days of unceasing but ungrudged work by Sergeant Croft's own station at Gabriel Street, by X Division, and by even wider circles of the Metropolitan police, Petrella realised that they were getting nowhere. A large, old-fashioned car had driven over a police officer who tried to stop it, and had killed him. Since it was driving furiously and without lights, it was a reasonable guess that it was being used by

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criminals in the course of their business; and that was all they did know.

Superintendent Benjamin, coming over on the third evening, put his foot down. He said to Petrella, " I know exactly what you feel about this, and I sympathise entirely, but you won't solve it, now, by taking running jumps at it. Let the machine tick over for a bit. Criminals never leave well alone. Something will turn up."

Petrella agreed with him, though reluctantly; went home to bed, and slept for twelve hours.

Next morning he turned his attention to some of the routine problems which had piled up during the search for Croft's killer: an outburst of shop-breaking; hooliganism at the fun fair in the Lower Cut; a robbery in Eton Road.

" No. 7," said Sergeant Belling. " A shop with a house over, but the owner's away on holiday. His manager looked in about twice a week. He's just given the alarm."

" And when did he look in last? "

" Four days ago."

" What's been taken? "

" They took the safe," said Belling. " Said to be about three months' takings in it, but no way of checking till the owner gets back. They first tried to get it open, then took the whole thing. Oh, and we've another report of a stolen car turned up. Third in three days. Found on the south side of the Common, down a dead end. Stolen in Gerrard Street, about a fortnight ago."

Petrella said, " We'll send Kendrew to have a look at it. The more work we give that young man the better." For Kendrew was another of his troubles. Since the night Sergeant Croft had been killed, he had been odd. Not sulking or reluctant to work. Far from it. But silent, touchy, and wrapped up in his own problems.

" He seems to have taken it hard," said Belling. " Don't know what he could have done. It wouldn't have been much help if the car had run over two of 'em instead of one, would it? "

" None at all," said Petrella. " Send him along to take the particulars of this car. We'll go and have a look at Eton Road. Sounds quite a professional job."

Kendrew located the car, which was an open Bentley, twenty years old, but in good condition. The seat-cover was neatly fastened down. Had a patrolling constable not happened to check its number, it might have stood in that quiet cul-de-sac for months, so incurious are Londoners about each other's business.

Kendrew removed the covers, and started a careful search of the seats and floor. He used his torch; then found an inspection

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lamp in the tool kit, and plugged that in. The car battery was still at full power, which showed that the car could not have been there too long.

By the light of the lamp he found one or two things that puzzled him.

In the back seat, and on the floor at the back, there was a considerable amount of fine sawdust. Not the feathery, flaky sort, but very fine and dry. Some hardwood, he thought. Mahogany, perhaps, or teak. On the lintel of the door was a deep scrape, almost a dent. And in the scrape, what looked like some flakes of high-gloss paint. The sort of paint a joiner or cabinet-maker might use. He dropped a sample of the sawdust and a sample of the paint into transparent envelopes.

The tyres were the next thing he looked at. Here he found something which made more sense. It was a fine, yellowish, top gravel, and it was pressed down well into the treads. It was on all the wheels and, as far as he could see, spread evenly all the way round. He took a sample of that, too.

"That car's been stood in someone's drive," he said to himself. "A drive that's been newly gravelled—and not very long ago. And the car's run backwards and forwards over it more than once."

As he straightened up, his eye took in another detail.

There was no driving mirror.

When he looked more closely he could see where the arm which had held the mirror out at an angle had been broken off.

Now up to that point, there had been nothing much to complain about in Kendrew's conduct. If in the excitement of the sequel he had forgotten to mention the splinters of glass which had cut his cheek, that was perhaps excusable. What he did now was quite inexcusable.

The first, and sometimes the last, rule in any detective force is that knowledge is shared. This rule he was proposing to break.

His reason was difficult to put into words. It would not, for instance, have been easy for Kendrew to explain to an outsider that he had put himself on trial and found himself guilty; that it was he who should have been dead, not Sergeant Croft; that in a blinding fraction of a second he had lost his manhood, and that the only way he could get it back was to catch the people responsible. It was not enough that they be caught. He had to catch them himself.

Kendrew thought the matter out, standing beside the car in that quiet, leafy cul-de-sac. Then he made his way down to Scotland Yard and sought out Detective Labbett, who had been a friend of his at Recruit School and now worked in the Police

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Laboratory. To him he handed three transparent envelopes.

"Would you have a quick look at them?" he said. "One of 'em's sawdust, I think, but I'd like to be sure. The other's paint. I'd like to know what sort of paint. And there's some gravel. Nothing funny about that."

"Where'd they come from?" asked Labbett.

"Off a stolen car."

"All right," said Labbett. "I'll give them the treatment for you. Where'll I send the results?"

"If you find anything, phone me or drop a line to me at Gabriel Street Station."

"Wherever's Gabriel Street?" asked Labbett, who thought London ended at the Thames.

Kendrew told him and departed. He had no time for lunch. There was a long day's work ahead of him, most of it footslogging.

First he called on a builder who had an office in Tonbridge Street.

"Fine top gravel?" said the builder. "Not used much in these parts. Very few rolling drives in this part of London."

"But if I did want some?" persisted Kendrew.

The builder, after some thought, put him on to a firm that dealt in ballast and shingle, and this firm put him on to a second firm, which passed him on to a third.

It was half past three by this time, and Kendrew had never felt hotter in his life. The sky was so blue it was almost grey, and the hardness and clarity which had come into the light spelt out a warning to the weather-wise.

At the third firm he struck some sort of a lead. The firm remembered carrying out an order, about two months earlier, for a contractor who was finishing a new block of flats at the south end of the Common.

This fitted in well with Kendrew's ideas. After they had got the safe back to wherever it was they were going to work on it, and then taken the car out and dumped it, someone was going to have to walk home. And, all criminals being lazy, he wouldn't want to walk too far. The Common was half a mile long at that point, and this was about right.

When Kendrew reached the flats, his heart jumped. Surely it was the same gravel? It was an uncommon colour; a curious, bright yellow. There was a row of garages at the back of the flats.

Kendrew sought out the porter, and showed him his warrant card.

Here, he ran into a snag. The porter was absolutely certain that no big, open Bentley of the sort Kendrew described had been seen near the flats in the last month. Moreover, the porter had once

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worked in a garage and clearly knew what he was talking about.

"Of course I'd 've known a Bentley if I saw one," he said. "These here are mostly family cars. Tinny jobs, really. Lean on the coachwork and you make a dent in it; not like a prewar job. They used to put real steel into them. And talk about engines! I spend more time tinkering with their engines than I do portering."

When Kendrew remained doubtful, he produced a master-key and took him round.

As he had said, each garage had its quota of nice, shiny, mass-produced, modern cars.

"I wouldn't say one of them mightn't own a second car," said the porter. "But where'd he put it? If it was left out in the open I'd be bound to see it."

Kendrew agreed with him. It had also dawned on him that a block of flats was not really the ideal headquarters for a gang which specialised in cutting out safes and taking them home to work on.

On the spur of the moment, and because he had reached the point where he had to confide in someone, Kendrew told the porter something of the circumstances that had brought him there.

"Well now," said the porter, "if you'd only told me that in the first place, I could've saved you some time. There's a house over there—" he pointed to chimneys among the trees—"an old-fashioned sort of place, standing by itself. They had their drive done same time as we did. Gravel came from the same firm. And, come to think of it—I've never seen it—but I've heard a car come in late at night. Sounded as if it might be an old Bentley. That'll be your friends, for sure."

"Thanks a lot," said Kendrew.

Inspector Petrella had passed a busy day, too. The early part of the morning he had spent at No. 7, Eton Road. The owner still had not been located. He was thought to be in the Channel Islands.

"And it beats me why he can't put his money in a bank like a sensible man," said Petrella.

"Banks aren't all that good nowadays," said Sergeant Belling.

"Better than a thing like that," said Petrella, pointing to a hole in the brickwork from which a safe, approximately three foot by two judging by the hole it had left, had been bodily removed.

"Quite a job," said Sergeant Belling.

An hour later, the Criminal Records Office was saying the same thing, in a different way. "Not many mobs lift the whole works," said Sergeant Phillips, "too much organisation needed. Trolleys and jacks and so on. If they're going to cut it open

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anyway, they find it easier to take the gear to the safe than the safe to the gear, if you get me."

"Yes," said Petrella. "I get you. In fact, it's a new one on me altogether."

"There is a man—" said Sergeant Phillips, busy with his cross-reference system. "What was his name, now? An American Pole. Dobrowski? No. Dodrowski. Got him." He pulled out a card. "He's thought to be working in south London. Mostly goes for shops."

Herman Dodrowski, Petrella read. *Desertion from armed forces. Six months, reduced to three. Assault on policeman. Six months*— It was the beginning of a long list: car-stealing, robbery, assault with violence.

Works with a gang of three or four. Specialises in bodily removal of safes and strongboxes. Usual method of operation is to steal a large, open car and hide it until needed for a particular job. Abandons car as soon as job is finished.

And in red ink, by itself, *Carries arms.*

"This would fit nicely," said Petrella. "There was a car found abandoned on the Common which might tie in with this particular job. I'm much obliged."

"Always at your service," said Sergeant Phillips.

Petrella put out what immediate feelers he could for Dodrowski. There was a teletype message to compose. There were contacts to make . . .

It was mid afternoon when the letter arrived. It was addressed to Detective Kendrew, but it was in an official envelope, and not marked private, so Sergeant Belling opened it and, as soon as he had glanced through it, brought it in to Petrella.

"I think you ought to see this," said Belling. "It's a report on some stuff young Kendrew sent down to the Yard this morning."

Petrella looked at it quickly, and said, "Did you know about this?"

"Not a thing," said Belling.

"Where is Kendrew?"

"He went out to inspect that car this morning. Haven't set eyes on him since."

Petrella read the report again. He didn't make much of the gravel. The paint flakes stopped him. "Dark green," he said, "on a metallic surface. Looks promising. What's this? Sawdust. A hardwood, probably teak, mixed with a considerable quantity of—*what*?"

"When I read that bit about alum crystals in the sawdust, I thought you ought to see it."

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Petrella said, " If what I've got here is a report on what Kendrew found in that car—and if he's hunting some line of his own—I think we'd better find him. And damned quick."

He looked at the wall clock. It was half past three. Kendrew had been off the map for more than five hours. He might be anywhere, in his own district or outside it.

He might even have caught up with Mr. Dodrowski, who worked with a gang of three or four and carried a gun. He put that thought away.

" I'll take a car, and a crew," he said to Belling. " Get hold of a second crew from Causeway and have them stand by and keep in touch by wireless. You stay here for messages. Message to all police boxes and stations."

An exasperating hour followed.

They crawled from point to point. A policeman coming off duty had seen Kendrew at three o'clock. Another had passed the time of day with him just before four.

After that there was nothing. He seemed to have walked off the streets and disappeared.

The second car came on the air from time to time, but Petrella had nothing tangible to offer it. At four-fifteen he told his driver to turn back to Gabriel Street.

Sergeant Belling had a pile of telephone messages, but nothing helpful. " He seems to have walked about a good deal," he said. " But most of these are before three o'clock. It's getting damned dark, isn't it? "

" Storm soon," said Petrella. The telephone went again, and as he was closest to it he picked it up.

" Groves here, from Common," said the voice. " I got it on the grapevine that you were looking for young Kendrew."

" Right," said Petrella. " You haven't found him, have you? "

" No," said Groves, " but one of our men was talking just now to the porter of that new block of flats south of the Common—"

Sergeant Belling listened to the telephone crackling. He wondered what it was all about. Then he saw Petrella's face.

" Thank you," Petrella said. " A big, old-fashioned house behind the new block of flats south of the Common. We'll look at it at once."

Next moment Sergeant Belling was alone. Outside, he heard the bang of a door, and two cars starting up.

Kendrew paused for a moment outside the door of the house. It had once been a considerable mansion, a relic of the times before the residential area had been pushed south to Blackheath, but the façade was blackened and chipped, and the woodwork unpainted.

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The garden, however, was in surprisingly good order, and the drive positively sparkled under its surfacing of fresh, yellow gravel. And Kendrew had not missed the marks of tyres on the drive. A heavy car had been backwards and forwards over it recently.

It was now so dark that Kendrew looked down with some surprise at his watch. It was only half past four, but a yellowish-grey curtain of premature dusk lay across the sky, deadening both sight and sound.

In the exaggerated silence, he could clearly hear the whirring of the lift in the block of flats a hundred yards away, and a man coughing as he bicycled past on the road at the end of the drive.

He touched the bell.

The door was opened by a fat man in overalls. He opened it so quickly that he might almost have been waiting with one hand on the latch.

Kendrew introduced himself.

"Why, come in, come in," said the man. He pointed to a door down the hall, then walked ahead and half opened it.

As Kendrew got there he received a blow between the shoulders which shot him forward. His head cracked against the edge of the door which opened under the impact, and he found himself inside the room.

Two men were looking at him.

"Do you always open doors with your head?" asked the bigger of the two.

"Hard-headed Harry, the boy detective," said the second man, who had white hair and pink cheeks.

Kendrew said nothing. He was still seeing sparks.

"Let's hear from you," said the big man. He had a grey face, grey and wrinkled like the undersea silt. His accent was American.

Kendrew's head was clearing. In the far corner of the room he saw a safe. The door had been removed and was propped against the wall. He said, "I've got some questions I'd like to ask you."

"And what happens if I tell you to take your socks off and put 'em in your mouth?"

"If you won't answer my questions," said Kendrew, "I shall have to ask you to come with me." He took a step forward.

"Don't try it," said the man, "unless you want to build yourself a new stomach." His right hand moved, flickered inside his coat, came out holding a gun.

Kendrew stopped moving.

"That's right," said the man.

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There was another silence.

"What are we going to do with him?" asked the fat man in overalls.

Kendrew realised that he had interrupted a removal. Shelves and cupboards were empty. Three suitcases stood, strapped, beside the door.

"There's a packing case upstairs," said the man. "Fetch it down here."

"And a hammer?"

"And some four-inch nails. We'll fasten this boy up and send him back by rail to Scotland Yard. It'll be a nice surprise for 'em."

Kendrew stood very still. He realised that his detecting career, lately so promising, was already at an end. If he submitted this time, he didn't see that he could ever stand on his own feet again. If he didn't—

The man with the gun was a full two yards away, watching him. There wasn't a chance in a million of jumping him.

Kendrew jumped.

The man's arm came up, almost slowly, and the two reports echoed each other. The one inside the room was loud, but it was engulfed and drowned by the tearing crash from outside as the storm broke and the sky fell in a blinding cataract of rain.

Either the sudden shock of the storm upset his aim, or the audacity of Kendrew's attack achieved a fraction of surprise. The result was what counted. Instead of shooting low and straight, Dodrowski shot high and left.

He did not miss Kendrew, because a miss at that range would have been impossible; but the bullet, instead of hitting him in the stomach or chest, went in under the collar bone and out by the shoulder blade.

It put his right arm out of action, but it didn't kill him, and it didn't stop him.

He whipped his left arm round his opponent's neck in a tight lock, and then fell down. Dodrowski, who had no choice, fell with him.

The white-haired man had also drawn a gun, but he put it away again. Kendrew was underneath Dodrowski and, with the two of them thrashing round on the floor like twin-hooked salmon, there was very little chance of getting in a useful shot.

Besides, as he saw, it wasn't necessary.

He picked up a bottle off the table, and edged forward for the kill.

The storm hit Petrella's party as they came skidding into the

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drive. There was not time to shut windows. The leading car ploughed up to the front door like a destroyer manœuvring at speed, a feather of spray in front of each wheel, and Petrella tumbled out.

He paused for a moment at the door to listen, but the drumming of the rain drowned everything.

"Break it down," he said.

One of the men produced a fourteen-pound sledge-hammer from the back of the car, swung it expertly, and hit the door just below the lock. The door opened.

It was bad luck for the man in overalls that he should have been standing just behind it. The crowd surged over him.

The white-haired man made the mistake of trying to get out of the window, fell into the area, and broke his leg. As for Dodrowski, he seemed relieved when Petrella gently prised Kendrew's arm from his windpipe.

I commend to your attention, wrote Petrella, in his official report to District, *the enterprise and perseverance displayed by Probationary Detective Kendrew. It was only from lack of experience that he failed to appreciate that hardwood sawdust, particularly when mixed with alum crystals, forms the normal fireproof lining of a certain type of old-fashioned safe. Taken in conjunction with the dark green paint on a metallic base, this strongly suggested that the men who had stolen the car might be—as proved to be the case—the persons responsible for the Eton Road robbery.*

Had he appreciated this point he would not, I feel certain, have attempted to tackle them single-handed.

Petrella paused and chewed the end of his pen. Outside, the world was fresh and sparkling from its bath. He hated writing reports.

What he really wanted to say was that, in the long run, the thing that mattered most in police work was guts, and that he thought Kendrew had done damned well. He could think of no official phraseology to convey it.

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NARROW MINDED?

I like the big screen—
Both the wide and the tall of it.
Too bad my poor eyeballs
Can't take in quite all of it.

TOM CONGDON

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DANSE MACABRE

" May I have the honour, my pretty? "

BY GEORGE LANGELAAN

THE old man spat on his calloused hands, and his fingers, twisted and deformed by age and rheumatism, closed round the smooth handle of the axe, a heavy woodman's axe. He raised it slowly before bringing it down with a grunt of satisfaction.

The second blow, aimed from a different angle, above the first cut, shot out a chip of wood the size of his fist. Again raising the axe, slowly because he was no longer very strong, the old man chopped at the tree in earnest. The skin of his bare arms was like parchment, and under it the muscles were knotted rope.

In reality he was very weak, and he knew it. A boy of twelve could probably have wielded his axe with much greater strength, but in every sinew of his bony frame he had the advantage of a century of experience, which made the axe, more than the arms, do the work. Once the axe had come up over his head, it was easy for the old man to bring it down with a gentle swing of the hips, followed by a sudden stoop and sway of the shoulders to give it added weight and speed.

He was about to take a short rest before the last rain of blows that would fell his tree, when he heard the boy calling from the bottom of the slope. " Grandpa, stop! "

Pretending not to hear, the old man again spat on his hands, grasped the axe, and raised it slowly over his shoulder. Looking below his arm, he could see the narrow street at the foot of the slope.

Some of the villagers were gazing up at him. The butcher came out of his shop, shaded his eyes from the sun, and shouted, " Grandpa, don't do that! " Farther down, by the canal, children were fishing and playing.

With a grin, the old man went on chopping at the tree. He chuckled as, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Young Armand panting up towards him. He liked Young Armand, the first of the family to be named after him. That was why, for miles around, they were known as Young Armand and Old Armand.

Four generations separated and united them, for Young Armand was the grandson of Old Armand's grandson.

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Montcelle was famous because of Old Armand, and all the villagers were mightily proud of him. On his hundredth birthday, the Prefect had come all the way from Epinal to congratulate him officially; after which it had become an annual tradition. Now, for his hundred-and-sixth birthday, the Minister of Education was to come to Montcelle all the way from Paris, just to present Old Armand with a gold medal.

What made Old Armand so famous was not so much his age—he was the oldest Frenchman alive—but his tremendous vitality and his colossal memory. True, he often remembered events, important events, that were not to be found in history books, or any other sort of book come to that; but any man doubting, or even only appearing to doubt one of Old Armand's stories ran a serious risk of being thrown into the canal.

Until his eightieth birthday, Old Armand had enjoyed another and far different sort of reputation. No one of course remembered him as a young man, but there were some very old people who remembered him as middle-aged. And, as if to corroborate some of the tales told about him, there were in the surrounding villages quite a few people who smiled just like Old Armand—a unique sort of smile that made their ears stand out on each side of their heads, just as his did.

Right across his scraggy neck could still be seen the horrid scar which he claimed was the result of a wound inflicted by a Prussian sabre during the war of 1870, but several of the villagers had it from their grandmothers that it was the cut of a scythe swung by a girl of Aillevillers. The legend also had it—for it had become a legend—that a witch called Black-of-White had saved his life by sewing up the wound and plastering it with a mixture of mouldy hay and cow dung.

A year or so later, Black-of-White had borne a daughter and, since she was not married and had never been to church, it was rumoured that Satan was the child's father. Some wicked-minded people later suggested that the devil must have looked rather like Old Armand because, as Judaise—certainly a name not to be found on any Christian calendar—as Judaise grew up, she looked more and more like him.

Judaise, who was now over eighty, like her mother never went to church and, like her mother, was considered a witch. She had not even cried when her mother died. Rumour had it that Black-of-White had been found dead, standing on her head in her fireplace, still clutching the broomstick on which she had evidently just managed to return home.

The doctor of Alaincourt who came regularly on his motorbike to visit Old Armand, shot over the canal bridge and roared up the

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steep village street just as Young Armand appeared at the top of the hill, carrying the old man in his arms.

" What happened? " asked the doctor a little later, washing his hands at the kitchen sink. " He must have made some very violent effort."

" Yes; now tell us what happened," said Young Armand's mother, handing the doctor a clean towel.

" He was cutting down the old apple tree with an axe—the big one—and I tried to stop him. I knew he shouldn't do anything like that! "

" And what did you do to stop him? " asked the doctor, putting away his stethoscope.

" I just held him. He was struggling—and all of a sudden he collapsed. But I only held him, I swear! "

" Doctor, is he—will he be all right? "

" He should be well again in a day or two, but he must rest. And you must make sure he does not over-exert himself. You see, holding him the way Young Armand did, prevented him from cutting down the tree, but caused him to make an even greater effort in the struggle. His heart is in good order, but at his age the slightest prolonged effort could easily prove fatal."

" Fatal! Fatal yourself, young man," shouted Old Armand, suddenly appearing in the doorway. " Don't forget I have buried every doctor who has come to practise in these parts during the last hundred years. Louise, get out some glasses and the eau-de-vie."

" Grandpa, your bare feet! You'll catch cold. Get back to bed."

" Back to bed! I hardly sleep at night and you want to put me to bed before noon. Come now, get us that eau-de-vie. Yes, the special one."

The news soon spread round the village that Old Armand was all right again.

" He certainly is an extraordinary old man," said the doctor to the butcher later that morning. They were sitting in the bar of the inn halfway up the village street.

" I'll say he is," butted in the proprietor, pouring himself a glass of white wine to drink with his customers. " Fifteen years ago, I remember, old Doctor Blanche had to be fetched in the middle of the night to fix his leg. He was over ninety, mind you, and had had a fight with the gendarmes of Pont-du-Bois. In the middle of the night they had caught him red-handed, breaking up and smashing the asphalt road surface."

" Why on earth . . . ? "

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"Every winter since the Public Works made an asphalt road through the village, it had been mysteriously broken up. It was a godsend for the cows, which otherwise broke their legs trying to cross the ice-covered road. Of course, we all knew that it was Old Armand, and for years the gendarmes had been trying to catch him . . ."

"So you are not dead after all," said Judaise in her raucous voice later that afternoon when Old Armand passed by the fountain just below the market place, where she was filling jugs.

"No, not yet, my girl."

And the children who had been peering down at her and trying to drop stones into her jugs, screamed with laughter and scattered like birds.

"You can laugh," squawked Judaise. "One of you will be going in the old devil's place next Saturday."

"Judaise, what do you mean?"

"You know, Old Armand. You know full well," she said, picking up her dripping jugs and shuffling away.

Yes, he knew what she meant. He knew that many of the villagers believed it also. Every year since his hundredth birthday, someone had died on 15th September. His birthday was the fourteenth, but since the fifteenth was the annual village fête, the official celebrations were held a day later. His hundred-and-sixth birthday would therefore be celebrated on the next Saturday.

On Old Armand's hundred-and-first birthday, Martin, the shepherd, had fallen from a tree and broken his neck. A tourist camping near by had seen the accident and run for help.

The following year, Marie-Jeanne's daughter had been killed by a car on the canal bridge. The driver had run away and, though the police had searched high and low for him, he had never been traced. It was then that people had started whispering; someone, probably old Judaise, had hinted that the stranger would never be found because it had really been no stranger. It had been Death in person come to reap a life in exchange for yet another birthday for Old Armand.

On his hundred-and-third birthday, Old Armand had thought the spell broken. There had been no accident and no one in the village had died. But the next day, Mourier, the blacksmith, had received a telegram informing him that his son who was doing his military service in Brest had been accidentally drowned. Later that day, someone remembered that a stranger, a young sailor, had been seen dancing at the village fête. No one knew who the sailor was or who had brought him to the fête.

Thus, as though it had been the result of a strange curse, every

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year, on 15th September, one of the villagers had died, and each time some stranger had been seen in the village. Old Armand who rarely went to church had nevertheless asked Monsieur le curé what he thought about it.

"Silly superstitions! Take no notice, Old Armand," said the priest.

Monsieur le curé was right, thought Old Armand a fortnight later, eight days after his hundred-and-fifth birthday. This time, no one in the village had died. But the next day, the gendarmes had come to arrest Marcelle, the baker's maid, who had been accused of having buried her newborn baby alive while everybody was at the fête. In less than an hour after their arrival the gendarmes had found the little corpse under the baker's wood-shed. Then, everyone remembered having seen an old woman walking down the village street with a faggot on her head.

Before the fête, no one apart from Judaise—who seemed to delight in predicting evil—ever talked about the strange curse, but all had it in mind. For over a thousand years this village festival had been held, ever since a time of fearful famine, when a large white ox had entered the church where all were praying for something to eat.

A small travelling fair usually arrived a day or two before and set up a roundabout, some swings, and a coconut shy. In the garden of the village inn, the best skittles players competed for a large fat duck; inside, the local billiards champions banged away at colourless ivory balls that rolled heavily on the patched, yellowish cloth of the billiard-table that was still green in the corners. In the evening, the room was cleared and an accordion player was set up on a chair on top of a wine-barrel for the dancing that generally lasted all night.

On the morning of his hundred-and-sixth birthday, Old Armand was up as usual at five milking the cows. In the kitchen, his great-grand-daughter was ironing his black suit, the one he had worn at marriages and funerals for over half a century now.

At nine o'clock all the villagers had turned out at the sound of the martial music played by the Passavant Band. Marching in step, smashing away at their drums, blowing for all they were worth into their bugles, the white-uniformed bandsmen looked really grand as they came over the canal bridge, and the villagers cheered when, still in step and still playing, they started marching up towards Old Armand's house.

The Minister of Education and the Prefect arrived at noon in a huge black car, with an escort of two policemen on motor cycles. As the Passavant Band had had quite a lot to drink since their

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arrival in the village, the Marseillaise which they played rather like an old-fashioned waltz sounded very strange. Throughout the Mayor's, the Prefect's, and the Minister's speeches, Old Armand had slept peacefully, but in such a dignified way, upright on his chair, that it looked as if he was listening with deep attention. The Minister had finally pinned a gold medal on his black coat, shaken him vigorously by the hand as he smiled at a prancing photographer, and driven away in his big black car.

After lunch and a nap, Old Armand joined the skittles players. A great shout went up when, having taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, he sent all nine skittles flying with one single shot. Hearing the doctor's motorbike roaring up the hill, he slipped on his coat and walked quietly out through the back of the inn and made his way down towards the canal where the children were splashing and learning to swim astride faggots of wood, in the very spot and in the same way in which he had learnt just one hundred years before.

Old Armand turned his head and saw the girl coming along the road the other side of the bridge, and he felt uneasy because he did not know her. Small, dark, and rather pretty, she was carrying a suitcase and stopped at the bridge to change hands. She looked down at the children playing in the water and, when they saw her, those who were naked ran for cover. Smiling, she picked up her bag and nearly crashed into Old Armand.

"Please, monsieur, where is the school?"

"You are the new teacher," said Old Armand, raising his hat. "Then you are not a stranger. Come, I will show you." He gallantly tried to take her suitcase, but she refused.

"Surely, you are Old Armand, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because of the medal. There was a picture of you in this morning's paper. You—you are wonderful, Monsieur Armand. You do not look a day over seventy."

Chuckling with pleasure, the old man conducted the new teacher to the school and, at the door, asked her if she would come to the dance. She said she would be glad of the opportunity to meet the parents of her future pupils . . .

"There he is! Grandpa, where have you been?" asked his grand-daughter. "The doctor has been here over an hour waiting to congratulate you."

"I have been finding myself a young and pretty partner for the dance tonight," said Old Armand, puffing a little.

Thunderous applause greeted the appearance of Old Armand at the dance. The accordion player had just finished his first

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tune. The boys, red-faced, their hair glued down and their eyes bulging because of collars and ties that would later come off, were at one end of the room, facing bright-eyed girls in their best finery who would first have to dance together in order to induce the boys to pluck up courage to come over and invite them.

Old Armand, erect and smiling under his long white moustache, waited for Young Armand who was getting his wrist stamped to show that he had paid his fifty francs.

Then, with his hand on the boy's shoulder, he made his way towards the corner where the Mayor and his family were sitting. In their midst, he had recognised the new schoolteacher whose simple but well-cut black frock caused many a whispered remark among the womenfolk.

" Mademoiselle, I am a little old for dancing, but I bring you the best dancer between here and Epinal. Try him and see," said the old man, slapping Young Armand on the back and sitting down with a grunt on the chair from which the Mayor's wife had just chased one of her numerous children.

" You have already met our new schoolteacher, I see," said the Mayor.

" Yes, I was the first to greet her. Doing what you should have done, you lazy young devil," said Old Armand.

" Old Armand, you know very well that you are always the first on hand when a pretty girl is around," said the Mayor's wife, handing him a glass of wine.

" She is pretty. Soon many a heart is going to beat faster for her, if I know anything."

" Starting with Young Armand's," said the Mayor with a wink.

It was not really the new teacher's fault if hearts started beating a good deal faster rather sooner than anyone could have reasonably expected. The poor girl was quiet and did not dance much; and that was probably the cause of the trouble. She danced a second time with Young Armand, and some of the boys she had turned down resented it.

No one was taking much notice, but Old Armand felt the tension rising. Very few of the boys were dancing, and a tight group of them was hotly arguing in the corner by the stove. He saw Young Armand in the centre flush angrily and snap out something that made at least three of the boys close in on him. Then quietly—too quietly—half a dozen of them stepped outside.

Without a word, Old Armand got up and went through the kitchen, knowing full well that they would be going round to the skittle alley. The skittle alley had always been the spot for settling such arguments. His own father, he remembered, had told him about a fight there. But he was too late.

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He heard the boy's shout, running feet, and turned the corner of the house just in time to see Young Armand fall to his knees, holding his belly.

"Did he kick you? Lie down, boy. Lie down!" said Old Armand.

"No—no—he had a knife. Grandpa, he—he's ripped me," said the boy, falling flat on his face.

"Nom de Dieu! Turn him over," said Old Armand to a small group of boys who had watched silently.

He knelt beside Young Armand, saw the pool of blood and, calmly, as though he was used to such scenes, he ordered, "You there, get the handcart out of the shed by the kitchen. Bring it round, quick. And you, lift him into it."

Silently, the boys obeyed, and Young Armand was laid on his back in the handcart.

"Listen, Old Armand," ventured one of the lads, "hadn't we better telephone the doctor? We can't take him all the way to—"

"Don't be a fool," snapped the centenarian. "Who talked about a doctor? No, take him down to Judaise. You, Albert, run ahead and tell her we are coming."

"But—"

"Do as I say! It's the boy's only chance."

Old Armand hung grimly on to the back of the cart, just where Young Armand's head rolled from side to side, as the boys pulling in front made for Judaise's house by the church, the very house where her witch of a mother had once sewn up his throat.

It was as though she had known in advance. Albert had reached her door a bare minute ahead of the little group, but when they carried Young Armand inside, there was already a sheet and a dirty pillow on the kitchen table.

"No, put him down on the floor first," said Judaise, her eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"Do as she says," Old Armand ordered fiercely when the boys hesitated.

"Now undress him," she commanded.

When they pulled off his trousers, she lifted the bloody shirt and stuffed a towel into the gaping wound.

They finished undressing him and, gently lifting him, laid him on the table. His lithe, muscular body was as white as a girl's, only his ankles, arms, neck, and face were burnt mahogany by the sun.

"And now, get out, all of you. No, not you," she said, as Old Armand rose from the chair by the table. "I shall need you. And you boys, not a word to anyone, do you hear? Not a word!"

Judaise slammed the door behind the boys and turned fiercely

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on the old man. "You know he hasn't a chance! Why did you bring him here?"

"He has a chance, Judaise. He will live, he must!"

"Old Armand, it is *Her*. She has come to fetch him."

"Yes, I know now it is. Judaise, I won't let *Her*. I tell you I won't. You look after the boy, and I'll do the rest."

"What will you do?"

"Never you mind. Look, he is opening his eyes."

"All right. Go across the road to Bertrand's stable; it is always open. Pull half a dozen hairs out of the mare's tail, and bring them back as quickly as you can. Also, if you are strong enough, bring me the saddle you'll find behind her stall."

When he got back, he saw that Young Armand's eyes were closed again, and that Judaise's hands were full of blood. Without a word she took the hairs, threw two white ones on the fire and started threading the black ones through strong needles. In a saucepan over the fire was a stinking, semi-liquid mass.

"Stir that, Old Armand. Don't let it burn now, keep stirring," she said, bending over the boy on the table.

Several times Young Armand moaned but, at last, Judaise slowly poured the contents of the saucepan over the tightly-sewn lips of the wound. Then, with a flat-iron that had been heating by the fire, she patted and flattened out the mysterious sauce that was thickening and hardening.

"Help me," she said, picking up the saddle.

Amazed, but obedient, Old Armand helped her put it over the boy's belly. She passed him the girths under the table, and together they pulled them tight and buckled them.

Young Armand opened his eyes again as she was ironing the warm blanket she had just put over his chest and shoulders. "Judaise," he whispered, "I'm done!"

"No, you're not," said Old Armand. "Do you hear, boy? You are not!" Young Armand's eyes were again closed.

"Judaise, how long can you keep him alive?"

"Why?"

"Never mind why. How long?"

"I don't know—perhaps till dawn. What time is it?"

"It was eleven when we arrived. There, listen, it is just midnight."

"Yes. Let me think. Half past two will be the most difficult. That is when they are weakest, especially with a new moon."

"That will do. Keep him alive till half past two. I'll do the rest."

"But do what?"

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"Never mind," said Old Armand, making for the door.

Yes, of course, Judaise was right. There was no doubt about *Her*. She had come—in the disguise of a schoolteacher—to take yet another life for another year of Old Armand's life. But, this time had picked on Young Armand. That was *Her* first mistake. The second was in not having taken his life immediately. She did not know about Judaise, perhaps; but Judaise would keep the boy alive for at least another two and a half hours.

Time enough in which to cheat *Her*, thought Old Armand, walking slowly up the hill towards the inn and the sound of the accordion. He had been afraid that the news might have spread, but the boys had evidently kept their mouths shut.

Old Armand hesitated at the door of the inn, then went on up the hill. He had plenty of time, and nothing must be left to chance. Without turning on the light—he had never liked the sudden glare of an electric bulb—he entered the empty house and made his way to his room at the back. He rummaged under his bed and found the old cardboard box in which were his military papers, a copy of his birth certificate, and all the family photographs. Down at the bottom, he found an envelope from which he extracted a five-thousand-franc note.

Back at the inn, he went quietly round by the kitchen and came in by the door next to the accordion player. He whispered something in his ear. The musician shook his head, but when the five-thousand-franc note changed hands, he nodded.

"Old Armand, where have you been? We thought you had gone to bed," said the Mayor.

"No, just a little rest. And you, my pretty, have you been dancing much?"

"Not since your grandson left us," said the new teacher.

"Young Armand is my grandson's grandson, young lady. And he has not left us—yet."

"Where is he, then?"

"Out of harm's way, for the time being. But let's not talk of him. I want you to do me a favour."

"With pleasure. What can I do?"

Old Armand stood up, took off his hat, and bowed. As though this had been a signal, the accordion player who had been watching him started playing an old-fashioned polka.

"May I have the honour? Will you give me this dance, my pretty?" said the old man.

And before anyone had time to do or say anything, Old Armand was out in the middle of the floor, his bony hands like two great claws gripping the new teacher's waist.

"But surely you should not dance like that," she gasped, as

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Old Armand swept her round and round, stamping his feet one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three.

" Oh yes, I should," whispered the old man fiercely, swinging his partner faster and faster.

The other couples had stopped dancing, and all round the room people had stopped talking and laughing. Only the sound of the accordion playing a maddening polka seemed louder.

" Grandpa, stop! " shouted Young Armand's father, catching the old man by the arm.

" Don't touch me! " shouted Old Armand, lifting his partner off her feet as he went dancing round the room.

" Please, let me go—" pleaded the girl in his arms.

" Let go of you so that you can take Young Armand? Not likely! I've got you and I'm not letting go! " gasped Old Armand. " It's me you're taking. Do you hear? Me! "

For the first time in many years, Old Armand felt sweat pouring down his scraggy neck. His breath was rasping painfully as he went madly dancing on. And then he smiled, the famous smile that made his ears stand out. He was winning, he was cheating Death! Like a red-hot iron, the pain in his chest was shooting up into his shoulder.

" I've won—I've fooled you! " He spat the words into the girl's frightened face as his legs collapsed . . .

They laid him on the billiard table and poured brandy into his smiling, half-open mouth, but Old Armand was dead.

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" Relax—it's just three jackals and a giraffe."

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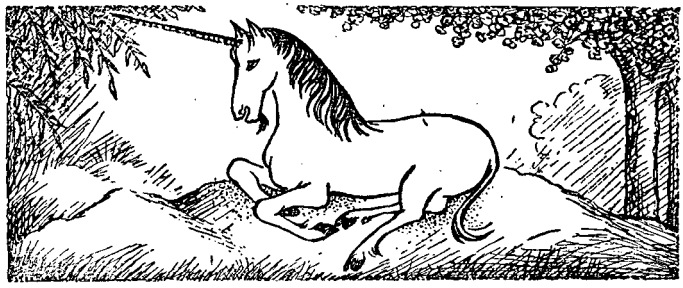

Spring Fever

In the spring of the year, when the blood is too thick,
There is nothing so good as a sassefras stick.

ANON

Seest not thilk same hawthorn stud,
How bragly it begins to bud,
And utter his tender head?
Flora now calleth forth each flower
And bids make ready Maia's bower,
That new is uprist from bed.
Then shall we sporten in delight,
And learn with Lettice to wex light,
That scornfully looks askance;
Then will we little Love awake,
That now sleepeth in Lethe lake,
And pray him leaden our dance.

EDMUND SPENSER, *The Shepheardes Calender*, 1579

In Honour Bound

After the family was all in bed I was awakened by having sweet soft lips pressed to mine and found Miss Ritter by my side, her arms around me. She cried and whispered to me the most loving entreaties. Her kisses and thrilling embraces aroused all my amorous passions. What a trial for one's principles of honour! The temptation of St. Anthony was not a circumstance to mine! I not only had my own passions to fight but the most provoking manipulations from this charming girl, who knew no wrong in following Dame Nature. But I resisted and triumphed and the honour of the house of Ritter suffered not at my hands.

SAMUEL E. CHAMBERLAIN, *Recollections of a Rogue*

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Pride of Place

Brief is beauty, brief is strength—
Wear them proudly: wear the Spring
Proudly; whose late flowers at length,
When they wither, shall enring
Love's first green unwithering.

GEORGE ROSTREVOR HAMILTON,
An Autumnal for Spring

Spring Sunshine

All the women are out this morning, in the sun. You can tell it's Spring. There goes Mrs. Cherry, you can tell her by her trotters, off she trots new as a daisy. Who's that talking by the pump? Mrs. Floyd and Boyo, talking flatfish. What can you talk about flatfish? That's Mrs. Dai Bread One, waltzing up the street like a jelly, every time she shakes it's slap slap slap. Who's that? Mrs. Butcher Beynon with her pet black cat, it follows her everywhere, miaow and all. There goes Mrs. Twenty-Three, important, the sun gets up and goes down in her dewlap, when she shuts her eyes, it's night.

High heels now, in the morning too, Mrs. Rose Cottage's eldest Mae, seventeen and never been kissed ho ho, going young and milking under my window to the field with the nannygoats, she reminds me all the way.

DYLAN THOMAS, *Under Milk Wood*

Spring Storm

In the bright forest of the blood
Filled with singing birds and fish
By his dromedary stood
The merchant with the silver dish.

Bearing in a strip of silk
Peppers, pomegranate-seeds,
Curdled cheese of asses' milk
Honeycomb and vitreous beads.

Distantly he heard the horn
Sullenly he wept to see
Wounded by the unicorn
The embalmed and incense-bearing tree.

M. K. JOSEPH, *Imaginary Islands*

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Green April

Young women in their April moodiness
Complain of showers, for they cannot go
Swimming, or to the courts to play tennis.
But if they suffer from a gentle blow,
What will the storm, the terror of saints, do?
If April presses their green tenderness
How will they stand the full weight of the snow?

Now they are killing time, with darts and chess,
And others dancing to the radio,
And some for kisses take a turn to guess
At names, and laugh at tales of love also.
Jenny, in her hot tub repaints a toe,
Admiring her perfect nakedness
While thunders crack and summer lightnings glow.

LOUIS SIMPSON, *The True Weather for Women*

When Spring Comes

And Stella said wildly. "When spring comes, darling. We can find some place. Some real private place. Oh, but you're so strong and I'm so weak and everything. But it's almost spring . . ."

"That's too long to wait," Al said hoarsely, but his mind raced ahead to warm nights when you could at least crawl under the bushes somewhere and have a little private seclusion. Ah, private seclusion, he thought. Ah, springtime without this cold wind freezing my ankles and making my ears ache. "I need you now, tonight," he groaned.

"Don't *say* things like that, I can't *stannnnd* it!" she wailed.

WELDON HILL, *Onionhead*

When daffodils begin to peer,
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year;
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Mr. Dorkins was a widower

BY NORMAN EDWARDS

WHEN Mr. Dorkins, back from the crematorium, sat down in his armchair, he felt a sensation of peace and happiness. Although he was tired—he was within whispering distance of his seventy-fifth birthday—he was, nevertheless, aware of exhilaration; a lightness of spirit; and the cool, calm contentment of one who has successfully conceived, developed, matured, and brought to a logical conclusion a cherished plan.

The Dorkins Plan!

He had first thought of the plan some weeks ago when his doctor had told him that Mrs. Dorkins was afflicted by a rare disease of the thymus gland, a disease known to medical men as thymolymphaticus. That information had reminded Mr. Dorkins of something he had read about a man, charged with his wife's murder, who had been found Not Guilty because of the rare defence offered on the prisoner's behalf.

Two days later, Mr. Dorkins had visited the Public Library and re-read the details of the case—the blind husband, on discovering his wife's infidelity, had flown into a rage and taken her by the throat, and she had fallen dead at his feet.

At the trial, things had looked bad for the husband. Two doctors called for the Crown had stated that, in their opinion, the woman had died from violence and not from thymolymphaticus. But a doctor called by the Defence had said that, in his experience, a patient suffering from this complaint had died of excitement alone. That was enough for the jury: the blind husband was found Not Guilty.

And it was enough for Mr. Dorkins, too. He had something to work on: a safe plan for getting rid of Carrie.

Mr. Dorkins had looked forward to a quiet and peaceful old age when he retired, but he had been disappointed. Very disappointed, indeed. For that, matter, so had Mrs. Dorkins.

"Having you about the house all day is enough to get on any woman's nerves," she told him. "I don't mind getting your

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breakfast, but now that I've only Mrs. Brown coming in to help keep the place clean three times a week, getting lunch and tea and a late supper is too much."

It wasn't only extra meals that exasperated Mrs. Dorkins. She complained bitterly that Mr. Dorkins was in the way, and bewailed the day he had made up his mind to retire.

For more than a year after retiring, Mr. Dorkins had tried hard, really hard, to heed his wife's orders. For as long as possible each day he kept out of her way. He got up early, made Mrs. Dorkins' tea, let the cat out, made his own breakfast, washed up, and—if it was a fine day—went for a walk. After that he spent the rest of the morning in the Public Library.

On his way home to lunch, Mr. Dorkins habitually looked in at The Six Bells where, in the saloon bar—for he was comfortably off as far as money was concerned—he refreshed his body and fortified his nervous system with a double whisky, to which he added a tablespoon of ginger wine. After that he swallowed two chlorophyll tablets, and walked slowly home.

Sometimes he was lucky, and lunch was eaten in an atmosphere of comparative calm. This rare atmosphere could be anticipated when Mrs. Brown had incurred the displeasure of Mrs. Dorkins. Mr. Dorkins loved such days: all he had to do was to eat his meal and refrain from talking while his wife told him in detail the history of her verbal duel with Mrs. Brown. She could talk about Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Brown's iniquities for at least an hour without flagging.

Warming his toes in front of the electric fire, Mr. Dorkins allowed his thoughts to waver away from the past to the immediate present. Very soon now, Mrs. Brown would arrive to get his tea. She would bring it to him on the big tray—with the large tea-pot—nicely warmed before receiving three teaspoonfuls of tea; four well-buttered muffins; a pot of "Gentleman's Relish." Yes, Mrs. Brown would look after him. Extra wages, of course. She was a widow, she needed extra wages.

A happy smile rippled across the fat cheeks of Mr. Dorkins. He sighed contentedly. Everything was all right. Carrie—well, he disapproved of cremation—burial in church ground was the best way—but in Carrie's case it was another matter. One couldn't allow sentiment to interfere with the Dorkins Plan.

But come to think of it, mused Mr. Dorkins, affectionately stroking the cat, Tiddles, who had jumped into his lap, having Carrie cremated hadn't really been necessary, because his plan had worked out so well that the doctor had never batted an eyelid when told on the telephone—in an agitated and grief-stricken

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voice—that Mrs. Dorkins had died suddenly in her husband's arms. This was very nearly the truth.

Mrs. Dorkins had had one thing in common with her husband—astrology. Like him, she believed in the influence exercised by heavenly bodies on physical bodies; and she studied with avid interest certain magazines devoted to the mysteries of horoscopes. The fate of the world and mankind had a peculiar fascination for her. From the day Mr. Dorkins showed her one of his astrological notebooks, in which he had written a forecast of the discovery of the atom bomb, Mrs. Dorkins regarded her husband with awed respect.

And so, when the doctor had told him about his wife's thymus, and how vitally important it was that she should avoid excitement of any kind, he had agreed that the doctor was right in not telling Mrs. Dorkins all the facts about her rare affliction—and the Dorkins Plan was conceived.

For the next few weeks Mr. Dorkins pretended to be increasingly concerned with the results of his astrological calculations. He confided to his wife that he feared the worst. The world—possibly the universe—was doomed; and about to experience a catastrophic disaster.

"One thing I am certain about," he had told her, "is that when it happens, it will be sudden. A loud explosion is clearly indicated. After that? Well, we shan't know what happens after that. Let's hope it will be painless."

It was painless for Mrs. Dorkins, when it happened a few weeks later. She was about to descend a flight of steps to the cellar when Mr. Dorkins fired a gun just behind her left ear—the gun, of course, was loaded with a blank cartridge, so that no physical injury was inflicted on Mrs. Dorkins. The noise was so startling that Mr. Dorkins' own nerves were upset—all the more so when Mrs. Dorkins fell head-first down the steps.

The extraordinary thing was—according to the doctor—that she didn't break her neck, or any other bone in her body. Of course, Mr. Dorkins made no reference to the shotgun when he explained to the doctor how he had heard his wife fall, and how he had dashed down the steps and gathered her in his arms.

"It was the shock that caused death," explained the doctor gently. "When one is afflicted, as Mrs. Dorkins was, with thymolymphaticus, a shock much less severe would cause death. Believe me, my dear Mr. Dorkins, she was dead before she reached the cellar floor. She did not suffer at all."

Everything had gone according to the plan. One or two helpful and sympathetic neighbours had asked Mr. Dorkins casually if he had heard a sort of muffled bang about the time of his wife's

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death, but Mr. Dorkins, naturally enough, was vague. He was grateful when a retired bookmaker, who lived a few doors away, remarked that the noise was probably caused by "one of them bloody jet planes." Mr. Dorkins agreed.

Mr. Dorkins and Tiddles, the cat, were both nearly asleep when the sitting-room door opened suddenly and rather noisily, and Mrs. Brown came into the room, switching on the ceiling lamp as she did so. The noise and the glare of light jerked Mr. Dorkins into a tense, upright position in his chair; and Tiddles jumped off his knees, swearing. Mr. Dorkins himself was startled when he saw that Mrs. Brown was not carrying the expected tea tray; and he was seriously perturbed when he noticed tears dripping down Mrs. Brown's lean face.

Making an effort, Mrs. Brown held back her sobs as she explained—not very clearly—that she was too upset to get Mr. Dorkins his tea. "But I've left everything for you in the kitchen," she mumbled, "as well as a nice pork pie I bought on my way 'ere—straight out o' Mr. Sudeley's deep-freeze, so you needn't 'ave no fears."

Mr. Dorkins gaped at her. Mrs. Brown suddenly stopped her tears and became voluble. "That 'orrible gas works," she went on in a fast and staccato monologue—evidently, guessed Mr. Dorkins, meaning the crematorium—"gave me the creeps, it did, with all that smoke comin' out of the chimney; and no proper Service; no organ; nobody singing the psalm 'cept that sexton.

"Upset me, Mr. Dorkins, that's what it did; an' although Mrs. Dorkins an' I 'ad our differences—I'm not sayin' we didn't, sir—I was very fond of the poor lady; so *brave* she was. 'Mrs. Brown,' she'd say to me, 'I got to plod on. Things is difficult now 'e's retired'—meanin' you, sir."

Mr. Dorkins shook his head, but he didn't say anything. He couldn't.

"An' in spite of our differences, sir," continued Mrs. Brown, "an' 'er naggin' me somethin' cruel sometimes about mud in the kitchen because of your gardenin', she was a lady; an' to see 'er goin' up in smoke this afternoon—very few flowers, too—'as real upset me. So you'll forgive me, I'm sure, if I leaves you to get your own tea an' supper."

Mr. Dorkins got his own tea and supper; and he went to bed that night feeling disgruntled, and very tired.

For the next few days, Mr. Dorkins found life very trying. Without the supervision of Mrs. Dorkins, the working powers of Mrs. Brown deteriorated rapidly: she arrived at unexpected

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hours in the morning and, after a perfunctory spell of exercise with the electric sweeper, followed by a gentle stroll about the house with a feather duster, she put on a little speed about half past twelve and prepared lunch for her bereaved master. And after a couple of Mrs. Brown's lunches—she had great faith in tinned food—Mr. Dorkins realised, almost with a pang of regret, what a good cook he had lost in Carrie.

Mr. Dorkins stuck it for a week and then, suddenly, after two large whiskies at The Six Bells, he decided to dispense with Mrs. Brown's services. Before telling Mrs. Brown, he spent about an hour writing and re-writing an advertisement for the local paper.

Companion Housekeeper for lonely widower.
Good home. Widow with pension preferred.
Good cooking essential. Box 197.

Much to his annoyance and disappointment, the advertisement produced meagre results: two letters. And since one was written by Mrs. Brown, Mr. Dorkins felt justifiably outraged.

But the other letter pleased him. It was beautifully written, but in a foreign-looking hand. The writer sympathised with Box 197; she, also, was lonely, and longed for a good home and happy company; and she claimed, in all modesty, to be a good cook. Indeed, her understanding of what was meant by good cooking was obvious because, on a separate sheet of paper, she offered for Box 197's consideration a few examples of the cooking she specialised in. After the diet devised by Mrs. Brown, Mr. Dorkins' mouth watered.

The writer concluded her letter by informing Box 197 that she was a widow aged 45; she had one daughter (married) who lived in the neighbourhood and who would always be willing to lend a helping hand when wanted. She had not, alas, a pension; but to reassure Box 197, in case he should imagine that she was destitute, she had £320 in Savings Certificates, and her late husband's insurance money—£1,000—in the bank. She signed herself, *Yours sincerely, Emilia Bastia, P.T.O.*

The letters P.T.O. puzzled Mr. Dorkins for a moment, but when he looked on the other side of the sheet of notepaper, he saw at once that Mrs. Bastia had added a postscript to her letter.

I am Corsican by birth, but I left the island when I was seventeen with my husband, Carlo Bastia, to live in England, where he worked all his life in the service of Lord Burzon.

Mr. Dorkins was, on the whole, favourably impressed by the letter, and without wasting any time he wrote a brief but friendly reply to Mrs. Bastia, asking her to come to see him one evening. Anxious not to waste time, Mr. Dorkins put on his galoshes and overcoat and—in spite of fine sleet and nipping north-east wind—

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walked to the pillar-box at the far end of the road to catch the last collection. Considering his age, and the weather, it was a silly thing to do.

The evening Mrs. Bastia called on Mr. Dorkins was fine: the sleet had gone, and the wind with it, but the temperature had dropped. Mr. Dorkins felt the cold in his bones—as well as the cold in his head—as he sat close to the electric fire and talked with his visitor.

Like himself, she was rather below average height—five foot two, or thereabouts—and definitely not lean like Carrie or Mrs. Brown. Mr. Dorkins decided that it would be an exaggeration to call her fat—plump, yes, and in the right places. A pleasant voice, low and gentle, and with a slight un-English accent which Mr. Dorkins found attractive.

After they had talked for nearly an hour—actually, after Mr. Dorkins had talked for nearly an hour, explaining his unhappiness, his dissatisfaction with Mrs. Brown, his loneliness, his dislike of tinned food, his aches, his pains, his absolute belief that the stars and the planets had revealed to him that he was destined for a long and happy old age, Mrs. Bastia's hands were trembling. The reason for this was explicable when she began to speak. She was upset.

"What you have just told me, Mr. Dorkins, shocks me. It is terrible that a gentleman like you should have to suffer. Whatever happens, you cannot keep Mrs. Brown. The sort of food she gives you must be very bad for you. Is she cooking your dinner tonight?"

Mr. Dorkins shook his head. "No," he said, "it's not one of her nights. She's left me some cold pork in the refrigerator, and some cold rice pudding."

Mrs. Bastia made a funny, foreign gesture with her hands. "No, no," she protested, "you must have a good, hot dinner. What else is there in the larder?"

Mr. Dorkins had done some shopping that morning, and apart from bread, tea, butter, and other odds and ends, he had bought a quartet of lamb chops.

Mrs. Bastia stopped trembling, and a smile appeared on her face. "That is better," she said briskly. "I will show to you my good cooking—"

Mr. Dorkins was surprised. "You mean," he asked, "you will stay and cook my dinner for me?"

"Our dinner," corrected Mrs. Bastia, with another smile. "Before we come to any arrangement it is only right and proper that you should satisfy yourself that I am a good cook. As it is

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now nearly seven o'clock, you won't mind if I have my dinner as well?"

"Delighted," murmured Mr. Dorkins. "Delighted."

"That is understood, then," said Mrs. Bastia, getting smartly to her feet. "But, after dinner, I think you should go to bed."

"Why?" asked Mr. Dorkins.

"Because you have a bad cold. At your age you must be careful. Once I had my husband ill with a bad cold, and because he wouldn't stay in bed he got pneumonia and then pleurisy. If you will let me I will take your temperature."

Mr. Dorkins nodded. He tried to speak, but he couldn't. He was too happy for words. And after Mrs. Bastia had gone to the kitchen, he stroked Tiddles in so subtle a way that Tiddles purred in ecstasy. So did Mr. Dorkins; but inwardly, and without sound.

In anticipation of a good dinner, he opened a bottle of Spanish burgundy. And after dinner he was so pleased with Mrs. Bastia that he opened a miniature bottle of kümmel. Mrs. Bastia didn't like it—said it tasted of aniseed—so Mr. Dorkins gallantly drank her share as well as his own, and went to bed without being asked to help wash up.

However, before going to bed, he not only thanked Mrs. Bastia for getting his dinner, but he congratulated her on the excellence of her cooking. And when she blushed a little at his praise, and said, "Not at all . . . It's a pleasure to cook for a gentleman like you," Mr. Dorkins offered, there and then, to engage her as companion-housekeeper at a weekly wage which, if Mrs. Brown could have heard him, would have made her gasp.

But Mrs. Bastia, although appreciative of his offer, said she thought it only fair to a gentleman like Mr. Dorkins to let him sleep on it: he might change his mind in the morning.

"Oh no," said Mr. Dorkins emphatically. "I shan't do that."

"We'll see," said Mrs. Bastia, with a large, motherly smile. "We must both have time to think it over. But I'll come along tomorrow morning and we'll have another talk."

Mr. Dorkins slept badly that night, for several reasons. He had eaten a very large and well-cooked meal; he had drunk three-quarters of a bottle of burgundy, followed by a miniature bottle of kümmel; he had been called a gentleman three times in one evening; and—although he didn't know it, because Mrs. Bastia hadn't told him—he had a high temperature.

When Mrs. Bastia called on Mr. Dorkins the next morning, she found him still in bed, fretfully complaining that he felt unwell. After a brief encounter with Mrs. Brown, who had

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turned up as early as half past nine, and was inclined to regard Mr. Dorkins as her special charge until the doctor called, Mrs. Bastia got busy.

For the next four weeks, she looked after Mr. Dorkins with the skill and assiduity of a trained nurse. Even the doctor was impressed; and Mr. Dorkins, who developed a cold on the chest and then pneumonia, in astrological fervour blessed his lucky stars that he had Mrs. Bastia available to look after him.

Mrs. Bastia had one more encounter with Mrs. Brown, this time in the kitchen. Mr. Dorkins heard only the echoes; but they were impressive, and reminiscent of the days when Carrie and Mrs. Brown so far forgot themselves as to allow an argument to degenerate into a brawl. Curious but apprehensive, he winced when he heard the front door slammed shut. A minute or so after this cyclonic departure, Mrs. Bastia came into his bedroom, looking a little flushed, but with the sparkle of victory in her small, black eyes.

"She's gone," she announced. "A week's money. I hope you don't think I've been extravagant?"

"Cheap at the price," answered Mr. Dorkins. "Did she give any trouble?"

"Nothing to speak of," replied Mrs. Bastia.

"But you can't manage without help," said Mr. Dorkins in a perturbed voice. "You'll wear yourself out."

"Don't you worry about me," Mrs. Bastia replied. "Rosa will be along later on to give me a hand. And after tea Percy will call to see if he can do anything."

"Rosa—Percy?" queried a puzzled Mr. Dorkins.

"My daughter and her husband," explained Mrs. Bastia as she bustled about the room, tidying up.

Mr. Dorkins, warm and comfortable in bed, watched her with satisfaction.

His new companion-housekeeper had been working since the morning she had called to talk things over and found him ill in bed. Negotiations had been swift and, up to a point, satisfactory to both parties. Mrs. Bastia had agreed to the weekly stipend offered by Mr. Dorkins; she liked her room; and she said—in a most respectful way—that she liked him. In short, she thought it would be nice for both of them if, after a month's trial, she and Mr. Dorkins found each other sufficiently satisfactory to come to a more permanent arrangement.

"After all," she said with a smile, "we must get to know each other. At the end of a month you may find I'm not suitable."

Mr. Dorkins, convalescing in a way which astonished and pleased his doctor, protested volubly. "Out of the question,"

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he told Mrs. Bastia. "You're very suitable. You can take it from me that I shan't change my mind."

And Mr. Dorkins meant what he said. His appetite became so sharpened by the succulent meals cooked for him by Mrs. Bastia that the thought of her leaving him was like the aftermath of a nightmare—it left him panicstricken. So he flattered her culinary skill at breakfast, at lunch, at tea-time, and at supper-time, and with such lyrical fervour that even Lucullus might have been forgiven for feeling bored. But Mrs. Bastia wasn't bored. She smiled and she smiled and she smiled.

"It's what I told you," she invariably answered her employer when his breath gave out after an impassioned pæan of praise, "I'm a good cook. It's what my husband always said. Almost his last words to me before he died were, 'Emilia, you've been a good wife to me—and a good cook.' "

Mr. Dorkins nodded. "He was right," he said with a contented sigh, as he finished a second helping of pudding. Out of curiosity he asked, "What did he die of, Mrs. Bastia?"

"Good cooking," she answered curtly.

She lifted the tray off the bed-table and looked at the replete Mr. Dorkins. "Like you," she said, "Carlo was greedy. Now you try to sleep. I want you to be a credit to me when Rosa and Percy come."

"What time are they calling?" he asked in a soporific voice.

"About six," she answered. "I've asked them to stay for supper. I hope you don't mind." Whether he minded she never knew, because Mr. Dorkins had fallen asleep.

After tea, which he had enjoyed because his sleep had been dreamless and refreshing—and because the four crumpets had been well-buttered—Mr. Dorkins, comfortably propped up in bed by extra pillows, was feeling in fine fettle and looking forward to meeting Mrs. Bastia's daughter and son-in-law.

By half past six he was feeling as gay as a grig: a generous libation of whisky was warming his stomach, and the physical attraction of Rosa, sitting by his bed, was such that he heartily wished he was in his twenty-fifth year instead of his seventy-fifth.

Rosa, guessed Mr. Dorkins, was not more than nineteen or twenty, in spite of her mature outline. She was rather short, like her mother; and although her breasts seemed to be aggressively protuberant, and her hips possibly wider than necessary, she had only one chin. A delightful one: dimpled. And that lower lip! And those sparkling eyes! Black—blue-black—like her mother's. Long fingers, too. Pity about the thumbs: just like her mother's. Not exactly ugly, but they did remind one of talons—eagles' talons.

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"Mother tells me you have been so good to her," said Rosa, as she poured out a second drink for Mr. Dorkins. "I've been looking forward so much to meeting you. Mother hasn't had a very happy life, you know; and you being so—so kind and considerate. Well, I've always said that kindness is what you expect in a gentleman."

The appearance of Percy, Rosa's husband, a few minutes after Mr. Dorkins had finished his supper, had no immediate and prejudicial effect on Mr. Dorkins' judgment. Percy was very quiet—almost shy—and deferential. Like his wife, he paid subdued and respectful homage to Mr. Dorkins because of his kindness to his mother-in-law; and he looked at him with admiration when he was told, in some detail, how successful Mr. Dorkins had been when in business.

Later in the evening, when Mrs. Bastia and Rosa were busy washing up in the kitchen, Percy and Mr. Dorkins became almost chummy. Although Mr. Dorkins disliked the way the young man's hair glistened, and reeked of some unusual lotion; and the way Percy flashed his long teeth in a succession of grins; and blew his nose on a mauve handkerchief which also reeked of something offensive to Mr. Dorkins' nostrils, there was no doubt about it—Percy had personality.

He told Mr. Dorkins two stories which were new to him. They were vulgar, but Mr. Dorkins appreciated vulgar stories if told with verve and gusto. Percy had both in abundance, but he also had a sympathetic streak.

This was made evident when Mr. Dorkins, after eulogising Percy's mother-in-law, confided to Percy his fear of losing her services. Did Percy think she was happy? Did he think she found her work congenial and not too burdensome?

"She likes it here," replied Percy. "She told me so. I think she'd like to stay on and make her home here, but Rosa thinks. . . "

Percy hesitated; but Mr. Dorkins begged him, anxiously, to go on.

"Well," said Percy, slowly and reluctantly, "Rosa loves her mother very much, and she wants her to be quite sure that if she does agree to stay she'll have security. I mean, Rosa hates the idea that her mother may have to find another home if—well, if you two had a disagreement. You see, although her mother's got a bit of money of her own, she doesn't want to live in a boarding-house, or anything like that. She likes living in a private house where she can be one of the family, so to speak, and where she can have the chance to cook. She loves cooking, you know."

"I know she does," said Mr. Dorkins reverently, "and I love her cooking. Oh, I do hope she will stay. You can tell your

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wife that I'll do everything I can to make her mother happy here."

"I'm sure you will," agreed Percy, "but—" and a rather apologetic tone crept into his voice—"Rosa does feel her mother should have security for her old age. Rosa and I are going to emigrate—going to Australia next month—and Rosa wants to be sure her mother will be nicely fixed up before we sail."

Mr. Dorkins looked and felt very worried. He would have to convince Rosa that her mother was left in safe hands, with nothing to worry about in the future.

"Of course," went on Percy, laughing in rather embarrassed amusement, "I know what would make Rosa quite happy and satisfied about leaving her mother behind when we go to Australia, but I've told her to put the idea out of her head, because—"

"What is her idea?" interrupted Mr. Dorkins in an eager voice. "Tell me," he demanded.

Percy shrugged his narrow shoulders and blew into his handkerchief. "Well, it's a sort of insurance idea," he explained. "You see, Mrs. Bastia has—well, she may have told you when she answered your advertisement—she has the money her old man left her when he died. Insurance money."

Mr. Dorkins nodded. "Yes, I know," he said. "She told me. A thousand pounds."

"That's right," agreed Percy. "And three hundred odd in Savings Certificates. 'Course, it's not much; wouldn't last long if she had to live on it."

"No, no, of course not," said Mr. Dorkins feverishly. Percy was so slow in telling him about Rosa's idea that he felt almost sick with impatience. "Go on, go on, my boy; what *is* your wife's idea?"

"Oh, there's nothing to it," answered Percy impatiently. "Rosa thinks that if her mother made a will leaving everything to you, and you made a will leaving everything to Mrs. Bastia—well, that would be a sort of insurance, wouldn't it? I mean—as Rosa says—you're a bit older than Mrs. Bastia, and if anything happened to you after Rosa and I had gone to Australia, well, Mrs. Bastia would have to find another job, see?"

Mr. Dorkins saw. He did not dismiss Rosa's idea as impracticable. Indeed, Mr. Dorkins quickly decided that Rosa's idea was a good one. He would have nothing to lose if he re-made his will in Mrs. Bastia's favour—he was childless, and had no relations. Instead of leaving his earthly possessions to a society devoted to the study of astrology, he might just as well agree to the Rosa plan, and make quite sure that for the rest of his life he would enjoy the inestimable benefits of a good cook.

"It's a very sound idea," he informed an astounded Percy.

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"I see no objection to it. I'll get in touch with my solicitor. It won't take long to make a new will. But will Mrs. Bastia agree? Won't she want to make a will in favour of her daughter?"

Percy shook his head vigorously. "No," he said. "I've talked it over with Rosa, and I agree with her. We don't need the money—I've got a nice bit put by myself, you know—and it would set both our minds at rest to know before we leave England that Mrs. Bastia is all right for life."

"She will be," said a happy Mr. Dorkins. "And I'll be all right for life, too."

Mr. Dorkins' solicitor, an old business acquaintance, lived in the neighbourhood. A telephone message, relayed by Mrs. Bastia the next morning, resulted in his calling on Mr. Dorkins about tea-time. When he was told to prepare the new will in favour of Mrs. Bastia, he raised all sorts of objections, but Mr. Dorkins brushed them aside.

"But what proof have you that Mrs. Bastia has a thousand pounds?" asked the solicitor.

"One thousand three hundred odd," corrected Mr. Dorkins irritably. "I've seen the Savings Certificate vouchers, and I've seen her bank book. So get on with it. And as the lady hasn't a solicitor, you can prepare her will, too. I'll pay."

After meeting Mrs. Bastia, and obtaining necessary particulars from her, the solicitor was somewhat mollified. But in a final conference with Mr. Dorkins, he again pointed out that Mrs. Bastia had only one thousand three hundred odd pounds to dispose of, whereas Mr. Dorkins had seventeen thousand at least, plus the house and its contents.

"I know, I know," snapped Mr. Dorkins, "but I'm good for many more years—"

"How do you know?" interrupted the solicitor. "You've just had a severe attack of pneumonia, and at your age . . ."

"It's all in my horoscope," explained Mr. Dorkins, speaking gently and patiently as if to a slow-witted child. "I shall live to be ninety, like my father. It's in the stars—and the stars don't lie."

A few days later, after the wills had been signed and witnessed, Mr. Dorkins' doctor examined him with particular care. When he had finished, and Mrs. Bastia had buttoned up his pyjama jacket for him and put the bedclothes in order, the doctor told him that he could leave his bed for half an hour each day to sit by the bedroom fire.

"You mustn't overdo it, you know," he said. "A severe attack of pneumonia, at your age, is bound to leave its mark; your

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heart has had to put in a good deal of overtime. Oh, no permanent damage; but your heart is tired. It needs a rest. So don't overdo it."

"Can't I go downstairs?" asked Mr. Dorkins. "I'm sick of this room."

"No, you can't," said the doctor. "No stairs for another week or two. Getting out of bed and sitting by the fire for a while will be quite enough. I want you to get your strength back and, above all, rest your heart."

"Strength back!" repeated Mr. Dorkins petulantly. "I feel strong enough. And there's nothing wrong with my appetite, is there, Emilia?"

Mrs. Bastia laughed and looked with affectionate amusement at Mr. Dorkins. "No," she agreed, "nothing at all."

"Glad to hear it," grunted the doctor. "Three good meals a day will do you a world of good."

"I'll see he gets them, doctor," said Mrs. Bastia, with a respectful but admiring glance. "Is he allowed to have a bath? Of course, I do the best I can while he's in bed, but he does so miss having a hot bath."

The doctor shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Quite a strain on the heart, you know, getting in and out of a bath. I'll look in in a few days' time, and then, we'll see, we'll see."

When the doctor had left, Mrs. Bastia was sympathetic. "After all, he knows best," she said soothingly. "Of course, he's rather old-fashioned, but I'm sure he knows best."

"Knows best!" snorted an irate Mr. Dorkins. "He's an old woman, that's what he is. Don't know why I've been to him all these years. I've told him time and again that water figures in my horoscope in a most important way—been accustomed to hot baths for years. Got so I can't be happy without 'em."

Mrs. Bastia was distressed. "I am sorry you're so disappointed," she said in her gentle, faintly-accented voice. "I did not understand about your horoscope and water. Blanket baths are not the same, are they?"

Mr. Dorkins enjoyed her sympathy so much that he harped on his grievance for several minutes, his plaintive voice nearly bringing tears to Mrs. Bastia's eyes.

"It is too bad," she murmured. "The bathroom is on this floor—no stairs to worry about—so why shouldn't you have a nice, hot bath?"

Mr. Dorkins sighed. "I miss the—the feel of water. Some Pisces people are like that," he informed Mrs. Bastia. "Just the opposite to what a fish feels *out* of water."

He laughed—a short, chesty laugh—pleased with what he

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judged to be a witty remark. "Fish out of water," he repeated. "Yes, that's what I feel like when I can't have a bath."

Mrs. Bastia looked at him compassionately. "I know," she said. "In my country we like the warm sun but not so much the bath water; but I know how an English gentleman misses his bath . . . just as much as I miss the warm sun in this cold island."

Mr. Dorkins sighed again. "Emilia," he said, "you're a very understanding woman, as well as being a good cook, but it's no good my complaining. If the doctor says it's bad for my heart to get in and out of a bath, I'll have to wait."

Mr. Dorkins spoke in such a resigned tone that Mrs. Bastia had to turn her head and look out of the window.

"It is a shame," she said in a low but passionate voice. "Such a simple thing, a hot bath."

"I know, I know," muttered Mr. Dorkins. "But the doctor's right. I don't really feel I'm strong enough to get in and out of a bath . . . not yet, much as I'd like to."

"Suppose," said Mrs. Bastia, as if suddenly inspired, "suppose someone helped you to get in and out of the bath. That would not be a strain on the heart, would it?"

Although seventy-five years old, and an invalid, there was nothing wrong with Mr. Dorkins' imagination: being helped to get into a bath, three-quarters full of hot water; and being tenderly and carefully helped out of it by Mrs. Bastia; and being dried with a big bath towel, ever so gently, by Mrs. Bastia . . .

Mr. Dorkins' heart fluttered, and his imagination ran riot for a few seconds, until he remembered two inexorable and undeniable facts: he was seventy-five and fat.

Mrs. Bastia turned away from the window and looked at her employer in a way that made it clear to Mr. Dorkins that she was embarrassed. "I mean," she said, speaking hurriedly, "I mean, when Percy and Rosa call tonight—I told you, didn't I, that they're looking in about seven with a friend, in case there's anything they can do to help me—us—perhaps Percy could help you have a bath. He's a masseur, you know, by profession. Works in a Turkish bath. He knows. He could help you get in the bath—and out again. I know he doesn't look it, but he's very strong, and very gentle. Why, do you know, he looked after Field Marshal Lord—"

Mr. Dorkins sat up in bed suddenly. He looked very excited. "Percy!" he exclaimed. "Of course! What a good idea."

"Only too willing, he'd be," said Mrs. Bastia. "Of course, I could, too, but men are so modest."

"Very kind of you, Emilia," said Mr. Dorkins. "But I'm rather heavy, so perhaps it would be best if Percy helped me."

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"Percy is very kindhearted," she assured him, "and when I tell him how much you'd like a hot bath—why, of course he will help you. Now, I must go and see about lunch."

"What is it today?" asked Mr. Dorkins eagerly.

Mrs. Bastia looked at him tolerantly as she turned in the doorway to answer, "Steak-and-kidney pudding. And I've made a nice treacle tart, which I'm sure you will like."

As the door closed, Mr. Dorkins sank back on his pillows and sighed in happy contentment. This was one of his lucky days. Percy would help him in the bathroom in the evening, and Emilia would help him enjoy his lunch with her superb steak-and-kidney pudding—one of his favourite dishes.

After a tea which was all the more tasty because of his anticipation of the pleasure of a hot bath to come, Mr. Dorkins felt sleepy, and he told Mrs. Bastia, when she lifted the tray off the bed-table, that he thought forty winks would do him no harm. Mrs. Bastia nodded agreement. When he has eaten four buttered muffins, a thick slice of Madeira cake, and a chocolate éclair, it is understandable that a gentleman should take a nap.

"I'm looking forward to that bath," said Mr. Dorkins. "I do hope Percy won't mind helping me."

"Of course he won't mind," Mrs. Bastia assured him. "But he won't be here before seven, so don't get impatient."

"No, of course I won't," muttered Mr. Dorkins drowsily. "Any time after seven." He yawned, and turned on his left side as Mrs. Bastia switched off the light. "What's for supper?"

"I'm afraid it will have to be cold supper tonight," she answered apologetically. "You see, if you're going to have a bath after seven o'clock, I shan't have much time left to . . ."

"O' course," he interrupted. "Just a cold snack will do."

"Ham and tongue and potato salad, and some nice mixed pickles—and gorgonzola cheese and biscuits," said Mrs. Bastia as she closed the bedroom door.

Mr. Dorkins had his bath that evening about half past seven. While Mrs. Bastia prepared it, and warmed two large towels, Percy and Rosa and a friend sat in the kitchen and drank Mr. Dorkins' whisky, mixed with a little ginger ale.

The friend was a young man of about Percy's age—devoted, as Percy was, to the art of skiffle. He smacked his lips as he sampled the drink in his glass. "Good stuff, this."

Percy nodded; and his friend whistled in admiration as Percy finished his drink in one gulp and then generously refilled his glass and drank again in one gulp. "You're thirsty," he chuckled. "You and Rosa comin' with me to the club tonight?"

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"When I'm through with giving the old man a hand in the bathroom." Percy explained how, at his mother-in-law's request, he was going to help Mr. Dorkins. His friend noticed with surprise that Percy's hand shook as he lifted the bottle and poured another generous portion of whisky into his glass.

Rosa spoke to her husband sharply. "That's enough," she said. "You can get sozzled afterwards—not now."

And at that moment they heard Mrs. Bastia calling from upstairs. "Percy, ready now." Percy swallowed what was left in his glass and rose slowly to his feet.

"You all right, old man?" asked his friend anxiously. "You look a bit white about the gills."

"'Course I'm all right," snapped Percy. "You help yourself, and keep Rosa company. I won't be long."

"Hope not," said his friend. "It's half past seven now, and if we're goin' to the club—" But before he could finish what he was saying, Percy had left the kitchen, banging the door behind him with unnecessary violence.

"Bit jumpy tonight, isn't he?" the friend asked Rosa.

"He's had a busy day," answered Rosa curtly. And as she poured another shot of whisky into her glass, the friend noticed that, like Percy's, her hand shook as she tilted the bottle.

"Poor old Percy," he said, "what with bathing your mum's boss and rock 'n' rollin' later on, he's in for a busy night!"

He was still laughing when Mrs. Bastia came into the kitchen. Rosa put her glass down on the table and looked at her mother.

"Well?" she said.

Mrs. Bastia ignored her. "What's the joke?" she asked Percy's friend; but she paid no attention when he started to explain; and she began to put plates and knives and forks on a tray. "You might get the pickles out of the larder for me," she said to her daughter. "The mixed ones. He'll want his supper as soon as he's out of the bath and back in bed again."

Two or three minutes later, when Mrs. Bastia was expertly cutting thin slices of ham, Percy came back into the kitchen. He made straight for the bottle of whisky.

"Is he all right?" Mrs. Bastia asked him.

Percy nodded and drank neat whisky.

"I shouldn't leave him too long," suggested his mother-in-law, "the water gets cold quickly this weather."

Percy grunted, finished his drink, and then wiped his lips elaborately with his mauve handkerchief. "I shan't be long now," he said to his friend. "You got the old bus outside?"

His friend winked. "Did have," he answered, "unless someone's pinched it." He looked at the plate on the tray, and

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smacked his lips. "Wish I was stayin' for supper. The old boy must have a horse's appetite."

"He eats well and enjoys good cooking," remarked Mrs. Bastia crisply. "Now, Percy, he's been in long enough."

"Right," said Percy.

As he left, she called, "And be careful when you help him out—that bath is slippery."

The friend was being helpful, and was cutting a large slice of gorgonzola cheese for Mr. Dorkins' supper, when they heard Percy's loud and horrified shout . . .

When all the evidence had been given, the Coroner shuffled papers on his table and looked with distaste at the panel of jurors. Rapidly he summed up. Although he was rather sarcastic about Mrs. Bastia, "a soft-hearted lady who had allowed herself to be persuaded by the deceased to connive at disobeying doctor's orders," he grudgingly advised the jury that she was in no way to blame.

She had taken the precaution of enlisting the aid of her son-in-law. The young man, a masseur at a well-known Turkish bath, experienced in the technique of assisting elderly gentlemen, had given his evidence with commendable clarity.

The evidence of the friend, who was with Mrs. Bastia and her daughter and son-in-law on the night in question, stressed the care and—one might say—devotion shown by Mrs. Bastia to her employer.

She had warned her son-in-law not to allow the deceased to stay too long in the bath because the water cooled off quickly in cold weather; she had busied herself, while Mr. Dorkins was in the bath, preparing his supper; and she had shown great presence of mind when, on hearing her son-in-law's shout from the bathroom, she had hurried upstairs and helped to lift Mr. Dorkins from the bath.

She, her daughter, the son-in-law, and his friend, had done everything they could to revive him. Alas, with no success.

"I must remind you," concluded the Coroner, "that there is no evidence, medical or otherwise, to support a theory of murder. The deceased was an invalid. His doctor has told us of the heart fatigue resulting from a severe attack of pneumonia, and that a post-mortem revealed no signs of physical violence."

The Coroner's voice was testy towards the end of his speech. But he managed a wan smile when, without any hesitation, the jury brought in a unanimous verdict of Death by Misadventure.

Very late that same evening, in a three-roomed furnished flat in an old house not far from the late Mr. Dorkins' house, Mrs.

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Bastia and Rosa and Percy were sitting in front of a dying fire.

Percy was rather drunk, and inclined to be bad-tempered when his wife ordered him to leave the bottle alone. But Mrs. Bastia acted as peacemaker, and suggested Percy had a right to relax. "After all," she said, with a tolerant smile, as Percy poured another generous tot of whisky into his glass, "he's earned it; and we shouldn't be where we are now if it hadn't been for Percy."

She looked at her son-in-law with understanding and something akin to affection. "Tell me, dear," she said sympathetically, "was it *very* worrying? Did he give any trouble?"

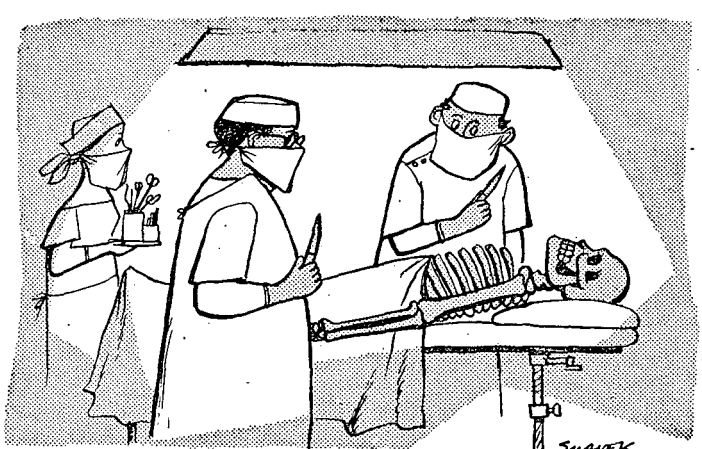
Percy shook his head; and then he began to giggle. "Trouble? Not on your life. Easy as kiss your hand. Bit of a job getting him into the bath—weighed a ton, he did."

"Well, I'm glad you had no trouble," repeated Mrs. Bastia, looking at the clock. "Time we all went to bed." And then, as an afterthought, she said to Percy: "I'm glad I put enough water in the bath. If I hadn't, it might have made it difficult when you held his heels to jerk him under."

Percy giggled again. "But that's what's so funny," he said. "When I went back to do it, he'd fainted, or his heart had failed or something. He was under the water—dead!"

"What?" shouted his mother-in-law. "Dead?"

Once more Percy giggled. "Yes, drowned. Didn't have to do a thing. The verdict of that old fool of a Coroner and his jury was correct: Death by Misadventure." © Norman Edwards 1959



"I wonder if we've gone a little too far this time."

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★ *Jane Gaskell plans to write a novel a year till she is fifty—which should fetch her a total of some thirty-five, as, at seventeen she has already had two published. At fourteen she was so far ahead of her age group in English and history, and so far behind in maths, that she was creating mayhem in the school timetable. So she left school, and has written and read more or less nonstop ever since.*

Here is her first Argosy story, and it's tough stuff.

BAIT

BY JANE GASKELL

THE three clearings merged into one another in a long line, like loose knots in a rope. From his hide, high in the tree, Falicq could see a little way along the path beyond the third knot. He saw the girl coming. He rubbed his chin. He must deal with her before she stepped into the space before him.

If he let himself be seen—that, most probably, would frighten her away. He didn't want that. He could watch her for some little time yet. There was no hurry. The dark irises of his eyes sparkled with laughter.

For just such an occasion—to deal with smaller game—the end of the long liana-twined rope hung before him practically indistinguishable from the many creepers festooning the clearing. Even if she was forest-bred—and he didn't think she was—she could not escape him, for the rope would swing him across to the split tree at the entrance, and the other trunks were so close about it that there was no escape sideways for her. She might turn and run back—then a leap from the rope's end would bring her down.

Unless she ran forward under his swing.

Why hadn't he realised that before now? That might easily happen with small game. Seemingly he had no option but to get down and work round on foot to intercept her.

Falicq slipped over his knife-hilt the loop of waistcloth that was there to protect this vitally-precious possession. He had one more moment's look at the slim figure in the distance, then ran across the broad bough behind him to the next tree.

Although she had distrusted the path, Avorr had followed it

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for upwards of three hundred paces: it had proved to be safe. She hesitated at the comparatively wide space. The path must be used by many animals, doubtless it led to water—to running water, for she could see the path passed pools in the clearing.

She stepped carefully aside so that at her back was a broad, smooth, blue-toned trunk, and she remembered to look upwards to search the green- and blue-shadowed foliage before she leaned against the tree, and let the forest look at her.

She stood, quiet, alert, glorying in the muffled, stealthy stillness of the forest, letting her body drench in the strong sunlight. She was aware of the forest's relentless, oppressive threat; aware, too, of the old beauty of the clearings, aeons old. Even the new, young growths were to a recurrent theme.

Four birds whirred in a scarlet-mauve flash across the path.

The girl tensed for long minutes but there was no other movement, except that a large bee buzzed lazily about, hovered over the vermilion bell of a tree flower, decided against it, and quested down the path.

Now only the fronded tops of a gennis plant moved.

She stretched out a hand and set them swinging. They scurred against each other, the almost comical sound making her smile. They were like the queer, half-wrong notes a harp can give.

She listened as the fronds rested and the notes faded.

Everything was on the verge of happening, of being different —not a threat so much as an imminence—but it could go on and on, uninterrupted, until darkness brought the great beasts for their drink.

At her feet the sun and the gennis fronds contrived of light and shadow a lace pattern that reminded her of the edge of a woven grass robe.

Almost she dreamt.

The sun was hot.

The glint from the broad, polished leaves forced down her eyelids.

She jerked herself awake, stepped carefully forward, balanced, pausing on the balls of her skinclad feet and, reassured, skirted the patch of red-gold flowers, each set jewel-like at the heart of a clumsily thick cluster of evil green.

Peering down, she saw innumerable red specks, infinitesimal insects in tumultuous movement.

A dry leaf crackled loudly somewhere behind her.

The girl leaned forward as she ran, twisted to look behind her as she swung her spear up and round. Even as she jumped sideways she felt her ankles grasped and, off balance as she was, yet thrust and threw.

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She saw legs leap high, apart, saw the spear flash uselessly between them, heard it snick into a branch beyond; she rolled aside over the blue grasses and bit her lip in pain and despair and humiliation as the youth's bare feet landed one across each of her upper arms, sickeningly heavy, pressing her elbows deep into the ground, numbing her arm muscles.

He bent, grinned down at her; lurched clear as her feet came up behind him; threw his taut length on top of her as she rolled over, twisted her arms behind her, pulled her face-up, sat heavily on her ribs, dragged the two knives from her belt, and tossed them aside.

He stood.

"Falicq," he said pleasantly. "Man, Falicq," and grinned.

Avorr sat up, keeping her arms behind her; she would not let him see her ease their soreness.

She bobbed her head in acknowledgment.

He waited before he spoke again. He seemed to be searching for words. "Girl," he said, and shook his head. "Not that way, no." He was emphatic.

Laughter entered the back of Avorr's eyes.

He was intentionally, painstakingly, speaking in baby monosyllables, expecting her not to know the Great Language. The miracle was that *he* spoke it, not that she should—she whose people, long before they left the northern mountains when the sea came in, had invented and perfected it.

Should she let him think she was barbarian? Should she make ludicrous noises?

"Gatta," she mouthed. "Geur wallanum."

Her voice had quavered, of course—she had almost laughed—but he would put that down to fear, or excitement, or distress.

She liked him, though she longed to bring him to heel.

His lithe legs pleased her; his arms were clean-muscled—there was no sign of the knotted tendons she knew in men.

That he should speak the Great Language was surprising, for he was obviously barbarian. There was no metal about him—except that the wooden-sheathed knife was probably a toughened bronze blade. He wore the clothing, if it could be called that, of a barbarian. The fabric at his waist was loomed of coarse, beaten frond-fibres; the feather-decorated pouch between his loins she would swear had been devised by himself.

Avorr's eyes went to her knives. Lying out of reach by the path. Given the chance, she could worst him with weapons.

The young man laughed. He bent, scooped them within his grasp, and dropped them beside her. He turned away, and she saw, amazed, that he was retrieving her spear.

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He was a husband she could have, when she had worsted him as she would. Yet she knew qualms. She would not be pleased to have him blinded. It would distress her to hear his screams as the white-hot stones were bound to the backs of his knees to cripple him.

Her breath was sharply drawn in as she had a momentary vision of him: still, after that and after the disfiguring strokes of the hot spear-blade on his thighs, still buoyant, still young and alive to life. She shook her head. She would not want to share him with others.

She flushed as the spear-hilt was held out to her.

Avorr grasped the proffered hilt and was easily pulled to her feet.

His eyes smiled into hers. Firm, cool, unmoist fingers took her wrist, and she was led across the path, into the murk of the forest, between the round boles of stupendous trees.

There was no path, but there was no hesitation from him, and he went before her seemingly unmindful of the weapons that she carried.

Well, he was quite safe. She had no wish to kill. The spear-haft brought down hard across his neck would stun him, but she would then have to carry him.

He turned and smiled to her.

She smiled back, somewhat strained, and he went on before her.

Avorr's lips were compressed. This fool seemed to have no fear. He was utterly a barbarian or he would know not to walk so blithely before an Amazon. He could walk on his own feet to where she wanted him. She would be as much of a fool as he if she could not contrive that.

Her foot slipped on the smooth roots, and immediately his arm was round her waist, holding her.

Avorr knew again the shame of blushing, not just because he seemed so aware of all her movements as she followed him. This, she acknowledged, might mean he was not as defenceless as she had arrogantly decided.

They came out into the clearing.

His eyes glanced about; his fingers took the spear from hers; his arms went round her. She stiffened. One hand tried to reach a knife hilt; his lips on hers forced back her head, fingers caressed her shoulder and neck, and with an almost silent moan she capitulated.

Her lips were open to the sweetness of his kiss. Her limbs seemed to have no strength. She was breathless, dying. Her arms were clinging to him, and she had no will to move to thwart

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him when she felt a hand remove the knives from her belt and drop them to the ground.

She found his lips no longer clung fiercely to hers; her eyes, opened wide, were fixed on his. Hers were full of an un-understanding worry. But she had decided—she did not know when—that to struggle was out of the question.

Avorr's finger traced over and over again the silver lines pounded into the bronze of the knife-hilt at his hip.

Soon, she must make a plan of some sort.

He had made no attempt to speak. But, why should he? He believed they had no means of converse.

Her arm slid from his neck, only to be taken in a confident grasp and held behind her. She struggled to take breath. She tried to move her lips away. And succeeded.

Her eyes opened wide in astonishment. There was a rope about her wrists.

Her eyes travelled up past the brown, naked torso to his face. He stood laughing at her.

With a sinuous movement she was up, too, on her feet. Her mouth opened to speak—and closed. There could be no harm meant her. Not when he laughed like that.

"I but want you here when I return," he said, smiling, plainly not expecting her to understand him.

He did not look at her. He took her in his arms and she was powerless. She stumbled back against the tree trunk. She felt his fingers at the binding on her wrists.

Not that it mattered. She could soon have released herself. She closed her eyes and waited a moment, then opened them to see him leave the corner of her vision. She tried to step forward, but her wrists were pinioned to the tree.

Avorr's mouth hardened, her eyes glinted. She would be gone when he returned. No man could tie knots an Amazon could not free. No man.

Avorr wrenched her wrists sideways. Another few jerks like that and the knots would be loose. She would not wait for him. She would not punish him for his temerity.

She would leave him, in peace, to live his own life—but alone, without her.

The knots did not give.

She wrenched at them savagely, she benefited them with curses. She tried to twist up her fingers. She placed her feet high on the tree trunk, leaning with all her weight to reinforce her strength. Four times she jerked the rope, and had to desist because she was afraid her shoulder would dislocate. But the rope was as firm as ever.

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The fool! Could he not have let her go?

She should have realised there was that much competence in him. She should have remembered he had beaten her—with his strength. And with his loving.

What a faint-hearted fool she had been!

She should have stunned him when she had the opportunity. She should have plunged a knife in his back. She should have. If she could . . .

She didn't like that ache in her shoulder.

The knots would now be tighter than ever. If only she could cut free—

But she couldn't; nor could her fingers get at the rope to shred it away strand by strand.

Well, he would be back. And the Gods of the Forest protect him when he came!

She looked up. For the first time she saw the three clearings, one leading into another. She saw the great beast coming.

She leaned forward on the rope, staring.

It had not seen her.

It stalked along, slowly, almost ponderously, pausing at each step; pausing, listening, taking one more step and listening. Now it was where she and Falicq had fought. Yes, that was where she had tasted defeat—now she would taste death. She would do more than taste it!

The animal padded on.

She wrenched madly at the rope. Could she scrape her knives towards her? Could she reach them with her feet? But then she could not pick them up.

He had said he would return. Maybe he was near.

"Falicq!" she screamed. "Falicq, Falicq!"

And as the scream straddled the air the great, spotted feline stopped—looked down towards her along the corridor of the clearings; loped forward.

"Falicq, Falicq, help me! Falicq, help!"

At the edge of the clearing the animal stopped. It stood, swaying its weight from one forepaw to the other.

Avorr pressed against the tree, then pulled frantically forward.

It gazed across the clearing at her.

They had killed one, five days before; she and the others who had left the tribe and since separated. She had been amazed then at the size of such a beast.

This one was larger.

The huge, flat head was poised, stretched forward—pointing her. The forefeet planted together, the weight of the animal

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taken by its hindquarters; ready to charge. It could not know there was no escape for her.

She suddenly saw beyond it the vermilion flowers on the tree in the third clearing, the flowers the bee had disdained, how many lives ago? Before she had met Falicq, before he had overpowered her, before he had loved her and tied her here, and gone away to let her die.

The beast walked nearer, softly; it stopped four, three lengths away.

Now she could hear the hollow thump of its tail against its flank.

She could even hear the slither of its tuft as it cleared itself from the long hairs entangling its hams, and she could hear the deep breaths and the little hiss as the breath entered and left the wide nostrils. She could see the faint, irregular splotches of two colours on its skin, the white turning to rust on its belly where it had lain in fouled earth.

Her eyes were stretched wide open, the muscles at the eye corners strained to atrophy. Her eyes would not shut. She could see everything—every detail of the clearings, of the great teeth and the great, curved sabres which were to rip her. She could see the wrinkling of the cheeks as the mouth snarled. Already its breath was overpoweringly strong. She could see the beast think; it knew she should be escaping. But she could not escape. This was her death.

This was what death was like. She was looking at it.

Falicq!

He couldn't have intended this, surely . . .

How long this was taking to happen! How swiftly could thoughts race through the mind?

She had passed through fear—and come out beyond it. Now fear reappeared—fear that it was going to leap—and as it leapt a deep-searing terror. How long it took the beast to reach her!

"*Falicq!*" screamed her voice.

There was a terrible sound as it leapt at her—a great swishing—and a tortured, snarling screech.

It lay at her feet, away from her, before her, ferocious hate in its eyes; and across its back lay a tree, a huge baulk of timber which had crashed down—a mechanism she could not see—she could not see how it had worked.

The beast was crawling clear!

Its tremendous paws scrabbled in front of it, great globs of blood oozed out of its back, and grew, and rolled down its yellow sides, threading down like drops of wind-driven rain on stone. It forced itself from under the tree. The big claws, wholly exposed from the pads, tore and pulled the tremendous mangled

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body free from the tree. It couldn't—but it did—it crept, so very slowly, forward. It balanced, not on its feet, but with its feet. The fur-hung belly lay horribly on the ground, but one paw lifted, lifted and stretched— It would reach her.

Avorr twisted sideways and back, her feet slipping, as the paw ripped down and thudded to the ground.

The eyes clouded and cleared, and now they were empty, they no longer looked at her. They were just there. They didn't matter now.

Somewhere in the forest she heard the greasy notes of a bell bird. That would be in the swamps away to the left.

She was still alive.

Tears crept from her eyes as she realised she was whole, unharmed—only because she had shrunken into herself. There could have been no distance, only time, between its claws and her skin; the scraps of fabric that had been her tunic lay, sliced from her, pushed deep into the grassy ground at her feet beneath the weight of the clawed paw, stretched out there; the paw that was larger than her stomach from her waist to her hip. She could compare so easily. She had only to look down beside her.

She looked up at the trees rising high above her and saw another baulk had come to balance there. The trap had set itself again.

And she was still the bait.

This was what Falicq had done with her. For him she was bait.

The girl stared, eventually stretching out a foot and kicking the great paw. She cowered within herself and recovered her courage as nothing happened. There was no stirring in the huge, bloodstreaked, shapeless body. It was really dead. And she was alive. Falicq must come back soon to see if his trap had worked and given him the game he required: to see if his bait was alive and useful—for love, and for life, or even as bait again. Or perhaps now merely as food for lesser things.

She would almost have preferred to have died beneath those ripping, sabred teeth or the claws.

To be standing here bared to his sight when he returned. A worsted creature, beneath his full regard, fit only to be used like a—like a belt-fastening, that made her as contemptible in her own eyes as she must be in his. When he returned she would still be here securely fastened, whole, having served his purpose —both his purposes—and her body would be fully seen like that of a beast or a slave.

She turned shamed, lustreless eyes on Falicq as the clean metal of his knife sliced through the tough leather strands of rope which held her. She lay strengthless in his arms as he tenderly

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murmured phrases she hardly heard. He was very anxious she should know that he had left her there because he had thought it the safest place to leave her. Had she been free to move about the clearing, maybe the trap would have fallen on her. The beast was huge, the most huge he had ever seen. He would never have believed any beast could crawl clear.

He would take her soon to his people, he assured her. Still trembling and bemused as she was, she might well have been the uncomprehending barbarian he thought her; his crooning monosyllables made no impression on her. He would take her to his people, and care for her for ever.

As he turned a little away again to regard his kill, the girl's hand reached behind her for the spear which leaned there, and with one practised, fury-driven thrust she transfixed him.

She withdrew the spear from his body, picked up her knives, and stumbled away into the forest.

The river should lie in this direction.

She must wash.

© Jane Gaskell 1959

★ ★ ★

SOLUTIONS to TALK OF THE TOWN
on page 38

1. *Stoke-on-Trent, Burslem, Hanley, Tunstall, Longton.*
2. *a. Oxford; b. London.*
3. *a. Edinburgh; b. Portsmouth; c. London.*
4. *a. Split (or Spalato); b. Venice.*
5. *a. New York; b. Vienna; c. Hull; d. Dublin; e. Paris.*
6. *a. Rome; b. Troy.*
7. *a. Dublin; b. Hamelin; c. Auburn; d. Alice.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD
on page 144

Across

1, *Rare meat.* 5, *Nitwit.* 9, *Bag a seat.* 10, *Scream.* 12, *Overrated.* 14, *Model.* 15, *Hub.* 16, *Isolde.* 19, *Evens.* 22, *Ghoul.* 23, *Wrests.* 25, *Ire.* 28, *Tweed.* 29, *Bamboozle.* 32, *Tedium.* 33, *Overhaul.* 34, *Dawdle.* 35, *Crusader.*

Down

1, *Rob Roy.* 2, *Rogues.* 3, *Miser.* 4, *An art.* 6, *Incumbent.* 7, *Wheedled.* 8, *Timeless.* 11, *Adhere.* 13, *Ago.* 17, *Solid fuel.* 18, *Low ebb.* 20, *Agitated.* 21, *Honeydew.* 24, *Sib.* 26, *Izzard.* 27, *Dealer.* 30, *Mover.* 31, *Ogres.*

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Wild and free

"AS FREE and wild as . . . as . . ." He didn't seem able to find the right word. He paused a moment; then, "A seagull," he said.

"I had a little seagull once," he continued. "I found him on the beach. Under a grey sky, on a stormy winter day, on the coast of Glamorgan. I was walking along, when I saw, far away upon the shore, something very small that didn't look like a stone. Even from a distance it seemed to be a living thing. I walked towards it and, as I approached, I saw that it was a baby seagull. I don't know how he got there, for there were no cliffs from which he might have tumbled, nor were there any footprints around him.

"He was as grey as the clouds that moved above us, clouds that had all hues of grey from near-white to heavy, rich grey, and which were constantly changing, assembling, and spreading—huge, foggy banks that sometimes, like a heavy udder, almost touched the earth, and thin, transparent veils of mist that swept lightly over the beach.

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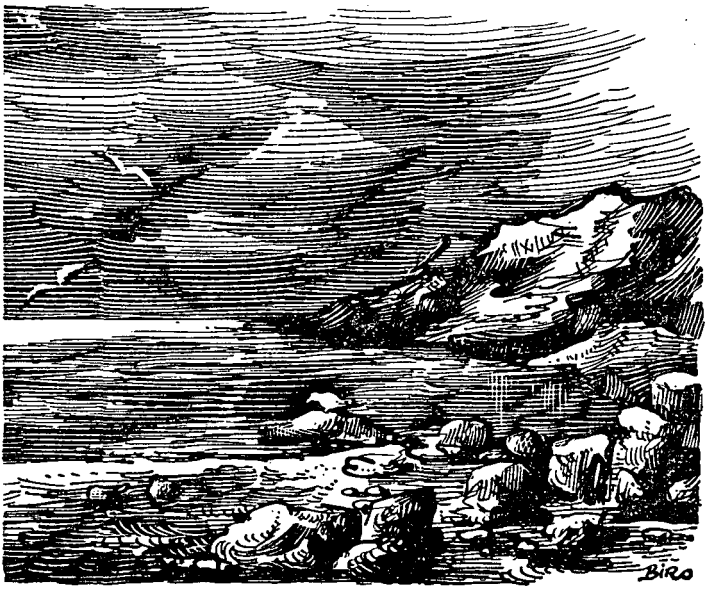

by Arturo Vivante

" From time to time other seagulls—white, these, for seagulls are grey when young but whiten as they grow older—wheeled above us, their cries made faint and vague by the storm then, giving themselves up to the wind, swept past us, their wings open like full sails.

" I watched it for a moment—that little mass of grey—without touching it. The feathers were little more than downy fluff ruffled by the wind. His eyes were half closed, and he lay there, an outcast, godforsaken, awaiting his fate with composure.

" The tide was coming in and he would certainly have drowned and been discovered days later, a little mass of bones and torn feathers, abandoned by the maws of the sea and the withdrawing tide. Again and again the tide would have reached it, as if to give it death and burial over and over.

" But I found him and saved him from the storm and the sea.

" My hand, when it descended to grasp him, must have seemed to him like the claws of a ravenous bird come to kill him, for he

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suddenly looked up and crouched as if he would bury himself in the sand.

"But he soon found that my fingers lacked the wiriness of claws, and I think he liked the warmth of my sweater, for he snuggled against it and closed his eyes.

"I felt his heart beating against mine, but so much, so very much faster.

"I held him to my chest like a strange gift, and brought him home. Small as he was, he had a distinct smell of fish about him, and I found that the smell of fish persisted, whatever I gave him to eat.

"There was nothing tame about him, nothing timid. He was eminently unruly. He clamoured for his food, gulped it down voraciously, and opened his pink gorge for more. He snapped at my hand, tickled my palms with his tiny claws. He didn't know what he wanted. To get away and to eat, I suppose; to sleep and to fly, all at the same time.

"I still remember the briny, acrid smell of digested fish that filled the garage and contaminated everything with the efficacy of a powerful perfume.

"'Oh, you've touched the seagull,' I used to say to my aunt.

"'Never!' she would answer. 'All I did was go into the garage.'

"Or, 'Don't shake hands with me,' she would say. But, sometimes, absentmindedly, she would return my handshake, then notice I was smiling broadly, and immediately dash into the kitchen to scrub her hands.

"The bird had personality. He was hilariously tameless; dauntless and fierce in his smallness. Though he lived in the garage, his presence was felt all over the house. The conversation centred about him. He showed no affection, no love or gratitude, but merely guzzled his food and prepared himself for flight.

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"One had the impression that feeding him was like charging a marvellous engine which would at a certain moment surprise all concerned by flying aloft; or rearing a champion for a mad race to the farthest Hesperides.

"Oh no! much more wonderful than any of these was the truth, was reality; for he would become one of those sea-mews which fly about the ships and the harbours and sweep the shore with their shadow, dip into the crest of the waves, and, with cries more joyful than flight, more glad than song, play with the wind, become the wind itself in a thousand personifications of delight.

"He seemed to grow up by the minute; he became stronger and bolder with each day that went by. Soon he started to fly, learning how all by himself.

"Each day he flew a little farther. I would pick him up and let him stand on the palm of my hand. His flight became more and more daring. Soon he flew over the garden fence and I had to chase after him. Whenever I touched him, I felt I was touching freedom.

"It was always in the direction of the sea that he flew, as if a great voice was calling him there.

"One day he soared above the telephone wires; I held my hands to my lips in apprehension. I thought I had seen the last of him; but no, he landed across the main road in a nearby meadow.

"The next day he went on a longer flight. He soared higher and higher, the wind carried him, he seemed to float in the air.

"I ran below with my face lifted, ran as fast as I could, looking at him.

"He dipped a moment—I had the illusion of a farewell bow—then the wind again lifted him; farther and farther he flew, towards the sea, out of sight."

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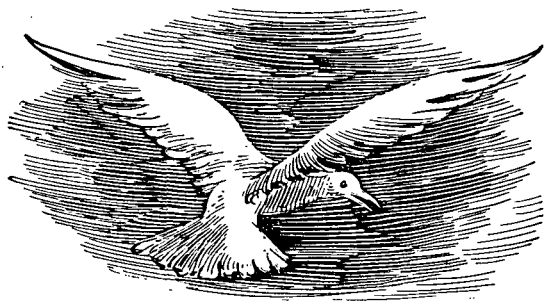

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THE ACHILLES AFFAIR

By BERKELY MATHER

When we parachuted in, disguised as Balkan shepherds, I knew him only as Andreas—British officer and secret agent, persona grata with different factions among the Balkan Partisans. And to him, I was not Peter Feltham, but Stavro. Andreas was tough, fearless, and on our first mission to the Greek guerrilla leader "Achilles," engineered our escape from a Nazi prison.

Later Bill, our Colonel, summoned me to Cairo to the operational H.Q. of the Resistance; he told me Achilles was collaborating with the Boche, and had captured Andreas. Parachuted back, I tracked down Andreas—tortured and unable to stand—killed the guard, and got him out; but without Silene's help we should never have made the coast. Her slim, boyish figure waited calmly beside us, watching for the submarine that was to take us off.

I knew now that I loved her. As I went aboard to warn them we were bringing her with us, my whole being seemed centred in one thought—Silene. Soon I heard Andreas' voice saying he had come alone. In fury I attacked him for letting her stay behind, risking her life to try to help her father. "I must go back," I shouted, realising instantly the futility of my words.

For me, there could be no return until the war was over.

I WAS just back in Cairo after two missions to Crete and another to Persia when I heard through my window at Shepheard's the cheering, yelling, and singing that signalled the end of the fighting in Europe. I was Captain Peter Feltham now—and had seen in Cairo Routine Orders, without particular satisfaction, that I had been given an M.C.

I was sent for the following day to Bill's headquarters, which

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had changed twice since I was there last. Bill asked me if I wanted to stay on with them. I thanked him politely, and said that, if it was all the same to him, I'd rather get out. I asked him about some leave then, and he said he thought that it could be fixed. Where did I want to go?

When I said Splitz, he shook his head and told me that Splitz was outside his parish now and I'd have to go through the Embassy and he didn't fancy my chances unless I had a good reason—a very good reason. Even I realised that loving a girl with rather remarkable eyes whom I had last seen on a darkened beach eight months before would not, in the eyes of the suave young men at the Embassy, constitute a very good reason, so I let it go. I would take some leave—and get there in my own way.

We went down to the mess, and over a pink gin he asked me what I intended to do. I told him about my uncle's Balkan tobacco business. I was his heir—hence my taking up Balkan languages—but the business was in ruins now, and likely to stay

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that way. As I left, I asked the question that had been niggling me—

"I suppose Andreas is not around, is he?"

"He is indeed," he answered, "he's staying at Mena House. You ask for Major Crewson. He's staying there with his wife."

I wondered vaguely what his wife was like. I couldn't imagine Andreas as a married man. Her presence would, of course, put paid to any chance I had of getting him to go back to Splitz with me. A pity. Still, it might be worth trying.

I drove out in the cool of the late afternoon. Mena House, that fabulous pub, still bore traces of her prewar plush, and fairy lights flickered into life among the palms as we turned in through the gates. I asked at the desk for Major Crewson and they telephoned up to his room.

I heard the clerk say, "Captain Feltham to see you," and I wondered if my name would mean anything to him. It apparently did because he said he'd be right down.

I watched him coming down the stairs. He had, in spite of regulations, gone into plain clothes, and I was conscious of the drabness of my damp khaki shirt against his well-cut dinner jacket. In view of our last parting I had been a little apprehensive of this first meeting. I needn't have been. The warmth of his greeting was genuine.

He put his arm across my shoulders and led me to a table outside under the palms. He called to a suffragi and ordered whiskies and soda—then he turned back to me and asked me where I'd been, what I'd been doing, what I was going to do. I gave him the briefest account of my comparatively uneventful life over the last eight months, and then asked him for his story.

He said quietly, "I went back. I went back as soon as my feet were healed—to organise Chrios' show. I came out a fortnight ago." He must have seen the sudden unspoken question that leapt to my eyes because he reached across the table and squeezed hard on my forearm.

"Silene's safe," he said. "I found her almost immediately. She had gone back to the charcoal-burner's family—the place she had borrowed the mule from. It was as we thought. Achilles had taken her father. He didn't talk—but he didn't last long, poor old chap. Achilles was in dutch with the Huns over my escape. He sent patrols to every farm in the area. Their call at the cave was all part of the dragnet—"

"But Silene?" I broke in. "Where is she now?"

He rose and looked past me. I turned and followed his eyes. She was coming across the grass towards us.

His voice seemed to come from a long distance.

"Here she is now—we were married last week. I'm sorry, Stavro—God, I'm sorry. I know how you felt."

I suppose the protective mechanism that brings a boxer to his feet at the count of nine swung into action then. I felt my face crack into a smile of greeting, and by the time she had reached us

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I was even babbling the polite felicitations appropriate to the occasion. She stood on tiptoe, her hands on my shoulders, and kissed me on each cheek, then stood away and searched my face. And Andreas, relieved, was calling for a bottle of champagne.

They pressed me to stay to dinner and were genuinely sorry when I swore that I had another, unbreakable, engagement. I did, however, split the bottle of bubbly with them and promised, with no intention of keeping it, to ring them up tomorrow or the next day. Then I left.

I didn't turn at the gate as I went out to the taxi rank. I couldn't—because I knew just what she would be looking like under those gay lamps. At the same time I didn't hurl myself into the Nile. I couldn't persuade myself that I'd been done dirt.

On her part, she had been grateful for the clumsy attempt I had made to comfort her that last afternoon—nothing more. As far as Andreas was concerned, he knew how I had felt about her—but would I have held off, had I had his opportunity? I knew damned well I wouldn't. No—it was a fair do, all right—and I hadn't even the comfort of a righteous indignation. A door had closed behind me. Wood smoke, the smell of untanned leather, and the glint of dim light on dark hair would probably reopen the door just a small chink from time to time in the future, but even that would pass.

The past was dead—or so I thought until one hot evening nearly ten years later. . .

I had just got back to Cyprus that evening, after a pretty adventurous business trip to Beirut where some guys who'd offered to sell me non-dollar tobacco had taken me for a ride and attempted to bump me off. In fact, I was lucky to have made a getaway.

I let myself into our house on the main Nicosia-Limassol road, dumped my bags, and lit a couple of lamps. The house was a chunky chocolate box of a place in bastard Spanish-cum-Swiss chalet style; its back perched on a stone terrace above the narrow beach. It was still swelteringly hot. I stripped off my sticky clothes, ran the few steps that separated the porch from the water's edge, and plunged in.

The water was cool and delicious and I felt the cares of the world lift from my shoulders as I struck out.

I wondered what Jo would be doing at that moment at home in London, and I felt guilty that I had let the turmoil of the last two days make me forget to telephone to her. And thinking of that reminded me that I had shoved her last letter in my pocket when my clerk had handed it to me at the airport. I turned over and swam in.

As I climbed out over the sea-wall a pair of headlights were stabbing the darkness from the direction of Limassol, but they did not worry me, mother-naked though I was, as the trees and the hedge shielded the glare, and anyhow this stretch of road was

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an absolute speedway for the locals. I waited for the car to pass before climbing on to the terrace. But it didn't pass. I heard it slackening speed and then, to my acute embarrassment, it turned, came up the drive straight towards me, and stopped just short of the pool of light by the front door. A man got out. I could see he was dressed in khaki shirt and shorts.

I shouted, "Any women with you? I've just been having a swim and I've got no clothes on."

I heard him laugh as he came across the dark terrace towards me. "Nary a woman," he answered. "You can come out quite safely."

I knew that voice, but for a moment it had me stumped. I heaved myself up on to the terrace and crossed towards him feeling as foolish as only a man caught without his trousers can feel.

"Thank the Lord for that," I said, "but I'm terribly sorry—for the life of me I can't think who you are—and I feel I should."

He reached me in a few swift strides, and I felt my hand gripped in both of his and nearly wrung off my wrist.

"The name is Finlay Crewson," he said, "or Andreas. Take your pick. Peter, you old bastard, how are you?"

I forgot my naked pelt and dragged him into the light. I had not much idea how time had dealt with me, but I could see that it had treated *him* lightly. He had the same quiet smile and the tight, radiating crinkles from the corners of his eyes. He was as lean as ever and still as tanned as in the days when we padded the hoof over the Balkan hills. The years slipped away in that instant.

"What the devil are you doing here?" I asked when I was able to speak.

"Building a pipeline from the Platres reservoir down to Famagusta," he told me, "or this section of it."

"But how long have you been here?"

"Only a few weeks. I arrived just after you had left on your last trip. I called at your office a couple of times—and I just ran into your clerk in Limassol. He told me you had got in."

I grabbed a towel and was struggling into my clothes.

He dropped into a long chair, stretched out his legs, and grinned up at me. "Tell me about yourself," he said. "How are things going?"

"I seem to have trodden on somebody's toes out here," I said.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he asked.

"I was taken for a ride in Beirut by some apes a couple of nights ago. They tried to put a bullet in the back of my head—and yesterday some woman rang me up at the hotel and told me that I was in danger everywhere in the Middle East, and if I wanted to die in bed in the fullness of time I had better beat it."

If I had hoped to surprise him I was disappointed. He merely looked at me hard for a second or so, then shrugged.

"Well, of course," he said at length, "if you're still in the business, that's different. You bloody fool. Why didn't you quit at the end of the war?"

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" The only business I'm in is buying tobacco," I told him.

" Naturally," he said.

" That happens to be the truth," I said. " If I was still cloak-and-daggering and had anything to hide I wouldn't have told you that much."

" Then somebody's business methods must be pretty keen. What the hell have you been doing? "

" For the last two days, trying to convince several boneheads, notably the Beirut police, that I haven't been making it all up."

He put his drink down. " Suppose you try and convince me," he said.

I shook my head. " I'm fed up with it all. In your present mood you're no more likely to believe me than they were."

" Try me," he said quietly.

I went over it, and he heard me without once interrupting; then when I had finished he slowly poured himself another drink.

" Answer this, or don't, as you wish—but there is no need to lie, I give you my word on that," he said. " Have you done any Intelligence work whatsoever since you quit at the end of the war? "

" Not a tap," I assured him, " nor have I been asked to."

" Somebody quite obviously thinks differently," he said.

" I see," I said. " Your idea is that some political mob thinks I'm working for another mob—but if you're right, something must have given them the idea, and I assure you I am not working for anybody other than Kindersley and Feltham.

" I think I told you once I was heir to my uncle's Balkan tobacco business. At the end of the war the business was in ruins—nothing but paper assets—and I was back in London wondering whether it was worth while trying to start it up again when Kindersley, one of my uncle's partners in the prewar days, got in touch with me. He had set up on his own as an importer of Turkish tobacco, and now offered to join forces with me. I put two thousand pounds into a capital fund, together with the paper assets of my uncle's business, and the firm of Kindersley and Feltham was born. As a matter of fact, you may have heard, I married his daughter, Jo. She's back in London at the moment as her mother is ill, so I'm on my own out here.

" Kindersley's working like a galley-slave at home and I've now established our headquarters here, buying wherever I can, grading and rough-sorting the heavy, cured leaf in Limassol, and getting it shipped back to England. But I can't for the life of me think why those guys in Beirut should have wanted me out of the way."

" It doesn't need much to spark some of these cookies off. You would only have to be seen with somebody of known affiliations for them to put two and two together and make eight of it. That, plus the fact that you're an Englishman, and as such automatically a capitalist-imperialist, makes you a natural for it—and particularly since you did undercover work during the war."

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"They couldn't possibly know."

"Couldn't they?" He laughed shortly. "You'd be surprised. Remember Tony—out at the depot near Fayid?"

"I do indeed." No one who'd been on that desert course in weapon training and parachute jumping could ever forget that professor-emeritus of the pistol and the sub-machine gun.

"Then why the hell shouldn't *he* remember *you*?"

"No reason at all, I suppose. But where does he come into it?"

"He happens to be one of the biggest comrades of them all at present."

"But I haven't seen Tony since I last passed through the depot."

"I'll bet he's seen you, though. His headquarters are in Damascus, but he gets about."

"How do you know all this?"

He got up from his chair and moved round the room—picking up an ornament from the bookcase, replacing it, and then taking up another. I thought for a moment that he had not heard my question so I repeated it. He turned and looked at me.

"I gave you the option of either answering or letting it go when I asked you a question just now. I'd rather let it go."

"I see," I said slowly. "But why call me a bloody fool when you thought *I* was still in the racket?"

"Because I am a bloody fool, and I wish to God that my only job was building pipelines—you have your answer now." He paused for a time, then said passionately, "Get out of it, Peter. Out of the Middle East, I mean. You're on *somebody's* list, that's for sure. If you were doing a job it would be different—but this way you wouldn't even know what you were getting it for."

I looked at him in silence for a moment or so. "Look here," I said at last, "I take it from what you've hinted that you're still in the—er—old business, that you know something—"

"I've not hinted at anything," he snapped.

"Forget it then," I snapped back. Then, because an edge was creeping into things, I grinned and poured two more drinks. "Sorry," I said, "but you don't have to worry about me. I can look after myself. Anyhow, I'm going home for a spell—"

"When?" he asked quickly.

"Soon as it can be arranged."

He reached out for his drink and I sensed the relaxing of the tension this near spat had built up.

"That's sensible," he said.

"I'd hate these lugs, whoever they are, to think they'd scared me off," I added.

"What does it matter what they think?" he shrugged. "Tell me about your wife."

"I've told you. She's the daughter of my partner."

"Happy?"

"Good God, yes." I sensed my own over-emphasis and floundered a little. "I'm afraid the rat race of making a living out here hasn't made me an ideal husband. I've left her alone a lot—

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but I've had time to think lately. That's why I'm going home—to get things sorted out. Kindersley can take over out here."

And then the tension had completely gone. We talked about old times far into the night—about Silene, who was now in Paris with her sister—and only there did I feel there was a slight restraint on his part, as if, as in my own case, the marital path was not as smooth as it might be. But this was Andreas I was talking to, so there were no hearts on sleeves that night.

He left in the early hours—and it was only then that I remembered Jo's still unopened letter. I moved into the light of the lamp and slit the envelope.

Darling, I read, *I have just finished four pages. I had written, as usual, two sides of one sheet and one of another. I filled up the fourth as usual, with the inconsequential things that have happened since I last wrote—things that don't matter a damn but which save letters from looking as if one had run out of things to say. I finished it, as usual, with 'lots of love, darling,' and put a line of silly crosses because there was still an inch of space left.*

And then I found myself crying, and I can't tell you why except that things have become so 'as usual' and I know that it is mainly my fault. I have stopped crying now and torn the other letter up; and B.E.A. have told me on the telephone, bless them, that they can get me on to Wednesday night's plane, so I will be in Nicosia on Thursday morning. If this has reached you by then perhaps you might be there, too.

Good night, my darling, Jo

If the plane was on time I could just about make it if I started out at sunrise. I was dog-tired, but my heart was singing as I set my alarm clock.

The sun glinted on her burnished hair as she crossed from the plane to the barrier at the tin terminal building, and she looked as sweet and fresh as a morning in May. As I gathered her into my arms without a word, I think we both knew that things started now, afresh, this moment. We hardly spoke at all in the ten minutes it took to get her through immigration, passports, and customs, but there was no constraint between us. We were through our doldrums now and were into the trades the other side, and small-talk was no necessary part of our equipment.

I said, "Breakfast at the Ledra Palace?"

But Jo said, "No—I had coffee on the plane. Let's get home." And then she added, "My rushing out here like this hasn't upset your plans—and wasted money, has it?"

I took my left hand off the wheel and put my arm round her shoulders.

"Your coming out here has upset nothing," I told her. "I was thinking of coming home because *I* had realised that things were becoming 'as usual,' too. You beat me to it, darling, that's all."

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"You're positive of that?" There was a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Hope to die," I assured her, and then went on to clinch it. "From a business point of view, coming home was the last thing I wanted at the moment."

"But you were still coming?"

"I was still coming."

"So I've done the right thing? Really? You're not just covering up?" The note of anxiety had now become one of desperate urgency, and I wasn't lying when I answered.

"You've done the right thing, darling. You always do the right thing. I was coming home simply because I wanted you so. I always have."

She gave a contented little sigh and snuggled down against my encircling arm.

We spent ten days of near-honeymoon, and one evening when we were sitting on the terrace under the stars, Finlay called in again, and I introduced him to Jo. Jo went inside to make coffee, and since I knew the subject of Silene would come up I plunged in in an effort to lay the ghost.

"I suppose you think I'm a changeable cuss?" I said.

"Your business, Peter," he answered. "I'm damned glad things have worked out for you as they obviously have. I think you're taking an unnecessary risk in remaining here—and I think you're exposing Jo to one, but I'm not fool enough to try to convince you of that."

"It's a calculated risk," I told him. "Things have worked out this way—the important things, I mean—I'm not going to change them."

"Have you told Jo anything about the Beirut business?"

"No," I answered, "and I haven't any intention of doing so. No point in worrying her unnecessarily."

Jo was coming out on to the terrace with the coffee tray, and he rose to take it from her.

"Oh," he said, as if he had just remembered, "Silene is coming out next week."

"Good God," I exclaimed, "have you only just remembered now?" I turned to Jo. "I've met Finlay's wife. They were married when we were all together in Cairo at the end of the war."

"I'd like to bring her down to see you," Finlay said.

"Lord, yes. We'd be delighted." I was surprised how little impact the news had made on me. "We'll look forward to it."

And then the evening was over, but this time Jo was with me, and the scent of the orange trees had blotted out that of untanned leather and wood smoke.

A fortnight later, Finlay came to my office. He was on edge and I thought he looked tired, but I put it down to the weather which was more than usually hot even for late summer—that and the fact that he was driving up and down from the hills almost daily,

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clearing heavy machinery that had come across from the Canal Zone to the Limassol Docks. He sat in a chair by the open window and sipped coffee, and talked about everything except Silene, until at last I asked about her.

"Oh, she's fine—fine, thanks," he said, and I sensed his desire to change the subject but I didn't take the hint.

"When are you going to bring her down?" I asked.

"Oh—when she gets settled in."

"What's wrong, Finlay?"

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong. Why?"

"You don't dissemble well."

He put his cup on the edge of the desk and lit a cigarette; it was some minutes before he answered.

"As far as Silene is concerned, nothing more nor less than I expected—I told you how things were, didn't I? I think it will be curtains this time." He drew on his cigarette. "I can't squawk. I've asked for it. But I haven't come here to expose my marital sores. I've got news for you."

"What news?"

He rose and went to the door, opened it and looked into the outer office, closed it again and came back.

"What's on your mind?"

"You," he said. "I've had that Beirut business looked into. It's more or less as I thought—with a few complications. If you're determined to be a bloody fool and to stay here, I'll do what I can for your protection—in my own way," he went on.

Irrationally, that stung a little. "I'm not a babe in arms," I said. "This is my own decision and my own responsibility."

"No doubt," he answered. "But don't forget Jo. If somebody has a go at you with a Sten or a bomb some night and she happens to be with you . . ."

I hadn't thought of that, and he saw I hadn't.

"I'd send her home, at least," he said.

But I had already seen the difficulty that lay there. We had so recently found ourselves, and here our real happiness lay. Jo would not risk that again lightly. If I suggested sending her home I would have to tell her why. If she thought I was in danger here she wouldn't go.

I sat frowning, and suddenly the solution came to me. I could move her out to Troodos. Just as in the old India, most wives and children went up into the hills in hot weather—but here distance did not preclude husbands joining them at weekends. Jo was one of the very few English wives down in the humid coastal belt at the moment, and we had actually discussed taking over the Haywards' pleasant little stone box up there, as they were now on leave at home. She hadn't been very keen on the idea, but at least I knew she wouldn't fight me tooth and nail if I made an issue of it, because her good sense had already told her that she might soon have to start looking after her health for the first time in her life. It was only a temporary solution, certainly—but then again, if

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there *was* a child on the way I could insist on her going home at the end of the hill season—I would even go with her. That was it, Troodos. I told Finlay.

He nodded. "All right, then—when will you get her away? I ask because I will get a particularly villainous-looking Greek gent to look in from time to time when you're left on your own. No point in alarming Jo unnecessarily by posting him there before she's off the premises."

"No need for that," I said, stung again.

"Let me be the judge of that, will you?" he answered, with the first touch of the old Andreas he had shown.

"As you wish."

He sensed the coolness of my tone because he got up, crossed to my chair, and dropped his hand on my shoulder.

"Listen, old boy," he said, "I haven't forgotten the old days—and I don't think you've got fat and soft and helpless. If you were still working for us I wouldn't try to act the nursemaid—but you're not. You're a civilian now, with all the disabilities of one when it comes to looking after yourself in a matter like this. I honestly believe you're in danger—real danger."

I saw his point and my own churlishness at the same time. I grinned shamefacedly and nodded, and I saw his face clear.

"I'll see Hayward's assistant this morning to arrange about the bungalow," I said. "I'll take Jo up myself on Friday night. I'll come back on Monday morning—so Monday will be my first night on my own."

"Good," he said. "If I can, I'll come in myself about eight. If I can't, I'll get Liantis along about six—just before dark. He'll try to flog you some fish. He has exactly seven words of English. He'll introduce himself with them, 'Very good fish, sir, like English mackerel.' He looks sorrowful and dreamy and he stinks like the bilges of a Dutch eel barge, but he's as tough as the hearthstones of Hades—and he's trustworthy."

"What does he do when he's not doing watchman?" I asked.

I could have bitten my tongue out when Finlay answered simply, "He's a fisherman." It seemed I still hadn't learnt.

The house at Troodos was called Ocean View. On a clear day, if you stood on a chair, you could see the Mediterranean through binoculars. Jo and I unloaded the car and carted the bits and pieces in. It was a pleasant little place—just three rooms and a tiny kitchen with a small lean-to that did duty as a bathroom. If there was an over-preponderance of Haywards past and present in nickel-silver frames, that was offset by the sight of Olympus through the windows that didn't look oceanwards, and the fact that they had been pretty decent in the way of rent.

A cheerful soul came in from the next house and offered us tea. She was the wife of an Army doctor from Famagusta, and although she talked eighteen to the dozen she seemed genuinely kind. I was glad that Jo had her for a near neighbour.

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We had been in the house only an hour when the telephone rang, and even though it meant a temporary surcease from sweeping and mopping I cursed it. It was my clerk.

"There's a cable in from Salajian, Mr. Feltham," he said. "He's on his way to London from Aleppo and he gets into Nicosia Airport on the four o'clock plane. He says he'll have half an hour there, and if you would care to see him he'll talk about the autumn deal. I thought I'd better let you know."

A trip to Nicosia was the last thing I wanted at that moment, but this was big business. If I could see old Salajian before he got home, there might be quite a lot in it for us. I looked at my watch. If I set out now I could just about make it.

"All right. That's fine," I said. "I'll go down. Everything all right in the office?"

"Sure, sure, Mr. Feltham. Everything quiet. The mail's in. I just handed your personal stuff over to the bus driver—three or four letters for you and Mrs. Feltham, and a parcel."

"O.K. I'll ring you on Monday morning if I'm not coming in. Good-bye."

I hung up and went to break the news.

Jo took it very well and didn't even suggest coming with me, for which I was thankful. It was as hot as hell even at that altitude, but she seemed to be enjoying her chores. She waved from the front door as I set out, comically pretty with her dirty face and dust turban.

"Back about seven with luck, darling," I called.

"Don't speed on that wretched road," she yelled back. "Have tea at the Ledra and bring some cakes—" And then I saw Mrs. Byng, the doctor's wife, hurrying out of her front door with the look of a woman who wanted some wool matched or a packet of cocktail sticks or some damned thing. Since I hate shopping I shot off in a cloud of dust . . .

The Aleppo-London plane was dead on time, and I grinned to myself as I saw old Salajian, all muffled up in an astrakhan coat, crossing the sun-baked tarmac.

It was the quickest deal I had ever made with the old rascal, and certainly the best. I blessed the air-conditioned cabin of the plane that was calling him back.

Had it not been for the cakes Jo wanted, I think I should have gone straight home from the airport. As it was, I turned right at the gate and went on to the centre of the town. And it was at the corner of Wolseley Barracks, as I turned down towards the Ledra Palace, that I saw Silene.

I recognised her immediately. A summer frock and the intervening years had not altered her one whit. I pulled into the gutter and waited for her to come abreast because I wanted time to collect my thoughts. The fever, if ever it had existed outside the imagination of a boy under strain, had died now, but as I watched her walk the few steps that brought her level with the car I was conscious of a constriction at the base of my throat.

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I opened the door and said, "Hullo—fancy seeing you here," or some other such damned silly banality.

She just said, "Peter!" and got in beside me, as if I had dropped her an hour before, and we drove the remaining few yards into the Ledra courtyard. I pulled up under the portico and set her down on the steps, then I went off and parked the car. When I joined her at the swing doors the constriction had gone.

I said, "I didn't ask if you wanted tea—"

"I do," she answered. "And I want to talk. I want to know where you've been, and what you've been doing, and what your wife is like—her name's Jo, isn't it?—and why you never came back that night to the Mena."

I led her to a table by the fountain. "I've been to London and Brighton and Damascus, Edgware and Istanbul," I told her. "I've been buying tobacco; Jo's a redhead who cheats over the washing-up; and I didn't come back that night because I loved you and the world had ended. Your turn."

"Paris and Cairo, Brazil and Boulogne. Nothing. You already know my husband—and I knew why you didn't come back—and I'm glad you got over it—really glad. You'd have been sadly disappointed in me, my dear." She put her hand over mine. "Happy?"

I nodded. "Very happy. And you?"

I didn't get her answer because at that moment, past her shoulder, I saw a Greek page-boy come out on to the terrace. He carried a small blackboard on a stick, and on it was chalked my name.

"Hullo," I said, "I'm being paged. Who the devil knows I'm here?" And then I remembered that Jo did, so I excused myself and hurried in to the desk.

"Will you ring Troodos 97, sir?" the Greek clerk said in answer to my inquiry. "The gentleman said it was urgent. He had been trying to get you at the airport."

"What is his name?" I asked, and a vague uneasiness was increasing to something like panic.

"He didn't say, sir—just Troodos 97. He wouldn't wait while I paged you, because he wanted to ring other places without delay—"

I had already got to the telephone box in the corner, and I sweated and fumed for a full five minutes because the number was engaged, but eventually I got through. A man's voice answered me in English.

"This is Peter Feltham," I said. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Major Greerley here," the voice answered. "I'm the station commandant. I'm afraid your wife has had an accident—"

My heart turned right over.

"Oh, my God—what has happened?" I croaked.

"Some sort of an explosion in your bungalow. I'm sorry I can tell you no more than that. The police are investigating now—"

"How—how bad?" I managed to jerk out.

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"No immediate danger—I can assure you of that, old boy, I promise you—but they would like you to get down there as soon as you can. They've taken her to the R.A.F. hospital at Akrotiri by helicopter. They've got equipment down there—"

I left the box feeling sick, and my knees were like water. Through the archway I could see Silene was no longer at the table where I had left her. I ran across to the car park. I don't remember much of the drive down to Limassol or the ten miles after it along the Akrotiri Peninsula but, looking back, the hair on the nape of my neck prickles.

A medical orderly was waiting for me and he took me straight to one of the Army doctors whom I happened to know slightly. He was in a long surgical gown and theatre cap, and he looked a figure of doom.

"She's a good strong gal and she'll cope," he told me, "but it was a bloody close thing, old boy."

"Can I see her?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not for quite some time yet," he said. "There's a lot to do."

"Just what happened?"

"From what I gathered from the police, there was a parcel of books in your mail. She opened it. There was a bomb in it as well."

The damned room would not stop swimming.

"It missed her eyes, fortunately," he went on. "How, God alone knows. It's rather messed up her face—but nothing that plastic surgery can't take care of. One hand, her right, is knocked about, but we will be able to save it. She took the brunt of it in her right side. Did you know she was pregnant?"

I nodded and swallowed.

"Well—I'm afraid it's put paid to that—this time, anyhow." He looked at me closely. "Better sit down, old boy."

I sat for the next two crawling hours, and then they took me to the tiny ward to which they had moved her. She was still unconscious, and her closed eyelids were as white as the bandages that swathed the rest of her face and head. One arm was stiffly extended in a wire cage, and I could see that some sort of framework round her was taking the weight of the bedclothes. Under it all she looked small and beaten, like a bird that has been shot and has dropped from a height. I kissed her unbandaged hand, and then they led me out to the room where I had been sitting, and found things to do elsewhere until I had got a grip on myself again.

Then the police arrived from Limassol, but there was little I could tell them without bringing in Finlay. They had been grilling my poor young clerk and also the bus driver without notable results, they told me. By some queer freak of chance that sometimes happens with explosives, the portion of the wrapping that had borne the label was untouched. It was that of one of the bigger booksellers in Nicosia, and my name and address was printed on it in neat block capitals. The postmark showed that it had been

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mailed at the Nicosia General Post Office at noon the day before.

"Have you ordered any books from these people?" the Inspector asked me.

"Not lately," I told him. "I have done so on occasion—but everything I've ordered has been delivered. I certainly wasn't expecting anything."

"I understand that you had been called from Troodos down to Nicosia," he went on. "If you had been there, I take it that you would have opened this yourself?"

"In normal circumstances I would have received it in the office—and I'd either have opened it there or taken it home to do so. I wish to God I *had* opened it," I said bitterly.

"It might have been worse," he said. "This bomb was a killer all right. The middle book was hollow, so our expert says, and it had something like an Italian Red Devil grenade inside it that went off on a mousetrap spring when the string was cut round the books themselves. By the grace of God, the woman next door, Mrs. Byng, came in just as your wife was opening it, and she turned away from the table to speak to her. If she had been concentrating on it, nothing could possibly have saved her."

My heart warmed to that garrulous soul, and I asked after her.

"Shock and minor cuts only," said the Inspector. "Damn lucky she was there—and that she was a nurse. She coped until help arrived . . ."

Finlay, as usual, had been right. I had to see him—and see him quick.

A military jeep stood by the gate of the villa when I arrived back, and three soldiers were arguing with a Greek who stood grinning in front of them and waving a fish. They broke off as I turned into the drive. A corporal came towards me.

"It's all right," I told him. "I live here."

"You're Mr. Feltham, are you, sir?" he asked. "Would it be all right to shove the jeep in your garden?"

"By all means," I said. "You can use the garage if you like."

"We'll have to keep the vehicle in the open, sir, or it'll interfere with the aerial. The chaps who aren't actually on watch could doss down there, though, if you don't mind."

"Help yourself," I told him. "Who's this fellow?"

"Somebody who's going to get himself pinched if he doesn't shove off before dark," he answered.

The Greek held up the fish before me.

"Very good fish, sir," he said. "Like English mackerel."

So this was Liantis. I had forgotten Finlay's proposal to post one of his men here. The presence of the troops made that unnecessary now—but here at least was a link.

"That's all the English he knows," the corporal said.

"I know a bit of Greek," I answered. "I'll explain to him."

I got out of the car and gestured to the man to follow me to the house.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

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"Liantis," he answered. "I have been waiting a long time. I have a message."

"What is it?"

"Andreas must speak with you. I am to take you to him."

"But there is a curfew. That is what the soldiers were trying to tell you."

"I know," he said, "when they go I shall come back."

"They are not going. They remain here all night."

He frowned. "We did not know that. It will be difficult. He is coming to a spot along the beach." I thought hard for a moment. The troops would be in the garage, with the exception perhaps of one man who would be in the jeep on wireless watch. They had now put the vehicle in position in front of the battered Nissen hut, shielded from the house by the hedge. That put the kitchen door on their blind side. It should not be difficult to slip out and drop down over the sea-wall without them seeing me.

"I will be there," I said. "I cannot tell you the exact time—it depends on the soldiers. I will try to make it before midnight."

He nodded and then turned and walked to the gate. He was just as Finlay had described him—big and slightly sorrowful, and the smell of fish did not come entirely from that which he carried.

I locked the front and rear doors then and put out the lamp and tried to cat-nap in a long chair. I didn't think I would be able to

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sleep, because my thoughts were chasing themselves round inside my brain like so many squirrels in a cage, but I must have gone out like a light.

I woke with a start. The deepness of that exhausted sleep had killed all sense of time, and for a moment I panicked in case I had overshot midnight, but a glance at my luminous watch reassured me. It was just after half past eleven.

I got out of the chair stiffly and was crossing to the window on the garage side of the house when I heard the tapping. It was soft but insistent and it came from the kitchen. I realised then it was that which had brought me out of the depths.

My hand went to the automatic under my left armpit. The tapping came again and with it was a whisper, "Peter! Peter!" The voice was a woman's.

I moved softly in the darkness across to the living-room door that gave on to the kitchen, the automatic cocked and held rigid in front of my navel. I was poised on my toes ready to swing to any point of a circle, or to drop and fire at the same time, and I even had time to grin sourly to myself when I remembered that it was Tony himself, the bastard, who had taught me.

I flattened myself against the wall and then slid down to floor level. There was a window behind me, and I had no intention of silhouetting myself. I peered round the lintel, and as I did so the tapping was repeated. I could see nothing against the lighter blur of the window, but the sound definitely came from there and as I strained my eyes the voice came again, low, insistent, urgent, "Peter! Peter!"

I recognised it now.

I crossed to the window in four strides.

"Silene!" In my blank astonishment I forgot caution and almost shouted. "What the devil are you doing here? There are armed troops in the compound—don't you realise—?"

I left the window and scrabbled at the fastenings of the door beside it, but she halted me, "Don't open the door, Peter. Don't open—"

"But you can't stay out there." I almost had the chain off now. "Don't, Peter. Don't—" she begged. "Listen to me— I can't stay—I must go, but I must warn you—"

"What is it, Silene?"

"Don't leave this house, Peter. Not for anything."

"But I must—" I said.

"You mustn't—on any account." Her voice rose to a point almost bordering on hysteria.

Something had aroused the soldier on the other side of the house, because his sharp challenge came to us through the night.

"I must go," said Silene in a babbled whisper. "I shall come again tomorrow night or, if I can't, the night after—" and she was gone.

I heard the corporal call out, "What's going on, Tim?" and there was a sleepy scrabble and a snicking of Sten bolts.

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But she had either gone to ground, or had vanished like a shadow through the hedge, because I heard them stumping round the garden, grumbling at the sentry's false alarm—and soon they returned to the garage and settled down.

There was no more sleep for me that night. I sat and fumed in the long chair and wondered what the hell had gone wrong, and why, even if there had been a change of plan, Finlay had risked sending Silene to tell me. Why hadn't he come himself—or sent Liantis again? I felt no gratitude for the warning—just anger.

When at last dawn came and the curfew was lifted, the corporal came to tell me that his patrol was standing down and returning to barracks until the evening. I stripped off my limp clothes and blessed the morning bite of the salt water as I plunged in from the boathouse slipway. When I had towelled myself and swallowed a couple of cups of scalding coffee I felt better.

I drove out to the hospital, and the night sister who was just going off duty let me see Jo for a brief minute. She had had a restful night, thank God, and there was an answering pressure of her fingers, while the corners of her eyes told me she was smiling beneath the bandages . . .

As I entered the office, the telephone was ringing. It was Finlay.

" I waited for you last night," he said. " What happened? "

" Damn it," I protested, " why ask *me* that? You sent Silene to tell me not to come—"

" I'm sorry," he said quickly. " I'm a bit out of touch at the moment. What did she say? "

" She didn't have time to say anything except that things had been changed and that I wasn't to move. She had to leave quickly. Haven't you seen her? "

" No," he answered. " I've told you—I'm a bit out of touch with things. I don't want to say any more over the telephone. Where can I see you? Can you go to your bungalow in about half an hour? "

" Of course," I said. " I'll leave right away."

I went out to my car, puzzled and uneasy. I could tell from his voice that something fresh was amiss.

Finlay was sitting on the sea-wall some distance from the house. He looked up and beckoned to me. " Hullo, Peter," he said as I joined him. " Sorry about the nonsense last night. Just tell me what happened."

I told him about Silene. How she had started to babble a warning about something, but then the troops got curious and she had left in a hurry, saying she'd come back tonight—or tomorrow. " But, Finlay, for God's sake, you mustn't let her," I pleaded. " It's not safe. I was furious with you for letting her come. Suppose the patrol had heard her and cut loose? Why the hell couldn't you have come yourself—or sent Liantis back, since there was a change of plan? "

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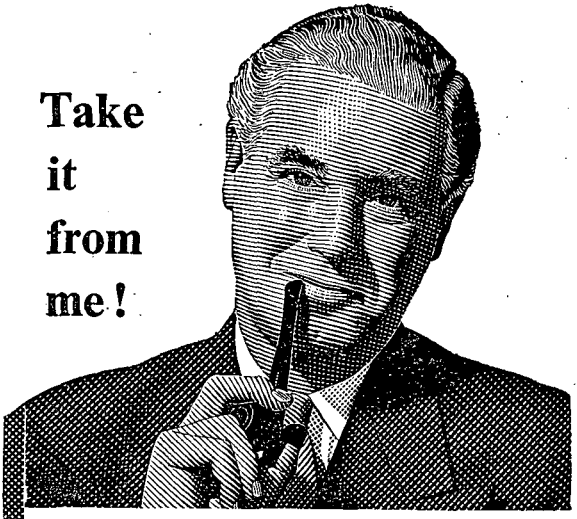

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"I didn't send her," he said quietly. "I haven't seen her for over a week—and I want to—desperately."

"What the hell's going on?" I begged. "Or aren't I supposed to ask?"

He shrugged. "Ask what you like," he said. "I'll answer if I can."

"I don't understand." I shook my head in bewilderment. "You mean to say she's left you? I'm sorry." There didn't seem much else to say.

He had picked up some pebbles and was jiggling them from palm to palm, looking out to sea, and in his eyes was the pain of the damned. I lit a cigarette and offered one to him, but he appeared not to notice it.

"I left Cyprus last Friday just after I saw you," he said at last. "I told her I was going to the Canal Zone for more machinery—but she knew I wasn't, because by the merest chance I happened to be in the Departures Office at the airport when she rang through to check whether I was on the plane. Before I could stop him, the chap told her I was just going out on the Beirut plane. I took the phone from him, but she had rung off. I got back yesterday afternoon and went up to the pipeline—but she had gone."

"I take it she doesn't know you've got two jobs," I said, "and she was angry at your apparent deception? Bloody awkward, old boy. Can't you drop her a hint?"

He laughed mirthlessly. "You're picturing Silene as a jealous wife? I wish to God it was as simple as that. She knows what I'm doing all right."

"Then I don't get it," I said. "What is she angry about? And how does that tie up with her coming down to see me—at such an appalling risk?"

"Because while you are alive you constitute an even bigger risk." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "You can thank those troops that you *are* alive."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said. I was getting angry now. "Suppose you cut out the riddles and come to the point?"

Again there was a silence and when at last he broke it, his voice was odd and flat.

"I've got to tell you," he said. "I had hoped it wouldn't ever have been necessary—but unless you know, you haven't got a chance." He paused. "It's Silene who is behind it all."

For a moment I thought I had not heard aright.

"Behind—? Behind what?"

"The two attempts on your life and the warning to get out of Cyprus," he said simply. "If you'd heeded the warning, the second attempt would not have been made. As it is now, she's bound to try again, because she knows that sooner or later we'll get our heads together over it. Did you tell her, by any chance, that you were meeting me last night?"

"No. I was going to but there wasn't time—"

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"Thank heaven for that," he said. "That gives us a bit of leeway."

"Damn you," I said, "will you tell me what all this is about? At the moment I can only assume that you've gone nuts."

"I've always known she was a Communist," he said. "With her parentage she could hardly have been anything else. Her father was one of their chief intellectuals—"

I started to break in again.

"Let me go on," he said. "I've got to tell this my own way—and it's not easy."

I shut up, and after a moment he went on.

"It seems crazy now, but you must remember that in the last days of the war we were all a happy band of brothers—and Stalin was our kind Uncle Joe. She never embarrassed me with her politics, nor did she show any interest in anything I was doing in South America or the Far East. I told my chief of her sympathies, of course—as I was bound to—but he left things to my discretion.

"When I moved back to the Middle East it was different—I couldn't risk having her with me so I sent her to Paris to her sister to get her out of the way. I should have quit this business then and gone back to join her. Things might have worked out if I had. I let them talk me into going on, though—just one more job, and then another. I told myself it was patriotism. It never has been. It is the eight-fifteen phobia. I've lived on the razor's edge so long that I can't get my feet on the ground—and they've moved in, and I've lost her to them. I knew it when she came back the first time—"

I fixed my gaze on a distant fishing boat because his face was twitching and his hands were gripping the stone ledge each side of him until the knuckles stood out like white mounds.

"I didn't connect her with this business of yours until I found her out in a lie," he went on. "She told me she had come straight from Paris when she phoned me on arrival in Nicosia. I found out that she had been in Beirut, though, at the same time as you. One or two other things clicked then."

He stopped again, and I could see that he was trying to pick his words with care.

"Go on," I said.

"Trouble here—really big trouble—is right up the Communists' alley. They have a man ready to take charge of things and to bring the various splinter factions here under one disciplined co-ordination. He was once a regular officer of the Greek Army but he came under suspicion of collaboration with the Germans during the war. He was dropped like a hot potato by the Greeks when the medals and rewards were being handed out after the war, and he's been in the wilderness ever since.

"If his connection with the Germans was ever proved, it would put paid to his acceptance here and they'd have to find another Messiah. I could unmask him—but I would need corroboration. You could supply that corroboration. We are probably the only

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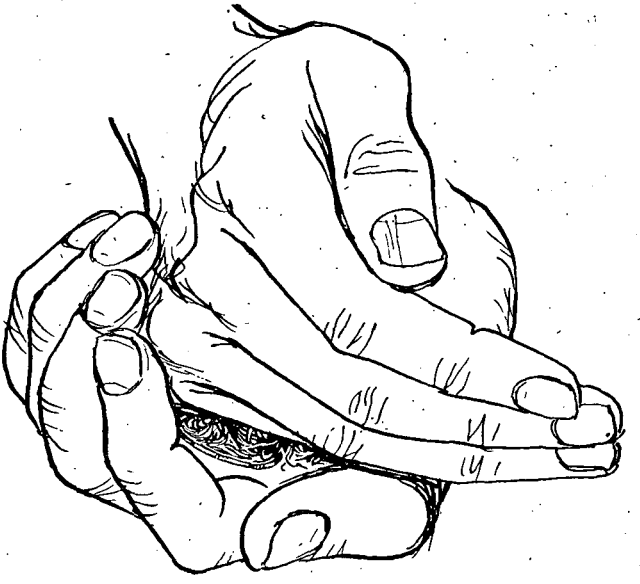

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two remaining people on this side of things who could put the finger on him."

"*I* could supply corroboration?" I just couldn't follow him.

"The man happens to be our old friend, Achilles. Now do you see why we're both on the list?" He turned towards me. "There is only one person who could have tipped them off about our previous connection with him."

The remaining pieces of the jigsaw were dropping into place, but some still didn't quite fit.

"But Achilles murdered her father—or at least gave him away to the Huns," I said.

"Do you think that would make any difference?" he asked bitterly. "You're bloody naïve if you do. In their blood-red lexicon, your enemies are those the comrades pick for you; your friends those with whom you're told to go along. Silene, poor little devil, is not allowed the luxury of personal hates—or loves. Communism is not politics, it's a religion—a dedication."

One straw had gone. Desperately I clawed at another.

"Why did she warn me not to come out last night?"

"I just have to surmise there," he said. "Time is getting short. Achilles is overdue already, and the coast has to be cleared. I believe she was sent to kill you last night but the troops spoilt her chances. So she has fixed another meeting for tonight. As I see it, she will ask you to come out on some pretext or other and lead you into an ambush. If I hadn't told you all this you'd have gone, wouldn't you? That's why I sent for you myself last night—to warn you."

The last straw had gone.

"What happens now?" I asked.

He shrugged. "The move is with her," he said.

"But surely there is something—" I broke off hopelessly.

"There is," he said grimly. "You've supplied the answer yourself. She's coming back here, isn't she? All I want you to do is to talk to her at the window. Talk about anything—shoes and ships and sealing wax—I shall do the rest. Just talk, Peter—and, for Christ's sake, don't think."

I couldn't grasp it for a moment, and when I did I felt sick.

"I'm to be the tethered goat, am I?" I said slowly. "All right, then—what happens next?"

"I'll be waiting out here with Liantis."

"And then what?"

"Between us we must get her away quietly. I'll have a boat waiting up the beach."

"What about the troops?"

"I've been watching their movements. They go out on patrol every two hours or so. That's where I'll need your help. If they are here when she arrives you must keep her in conversation, but be careful. If necessary I'll try to arrange some sort of diversion that will take them out to investigate."

Though I was hating this as I had never hated anything before, I

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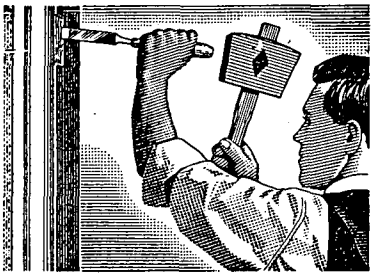
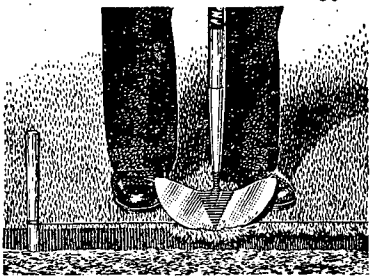
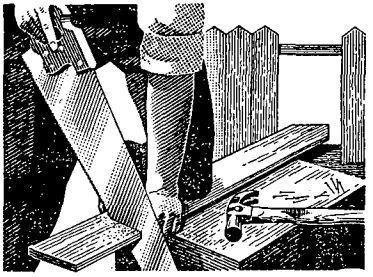




DOOR TO HANG . . . . . LAWN TO TEND



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could see the stark, unavoidable necessity for it. But there was one thing I had to know before I could accept it fully.

"You're not—not handing her over to anybody?"

"Who the hell to? And on what grounds? No, it's not as easy as that. This is something I've got to deal with myself. The book doesn't lay the drill down in black and white." He turned and looked at me, and his face was twisted. "There are no Rules for the Disposal of People One Loves, Peter."

I tried to force myself into a final check of Finlay's detailed instructions, but the cogs refused to mesh so I gave it up . . . Silene had stood between us and death once, and at the end of it all had refused her own passage to safety and had gone back to look for her father. What power was it that this evil thing wielded over people? What was it that could turn the fierce, white flame of her kind of courage into the smouldering, guttering glim of treachery? That could make her go along with her father's murderers and plot the death of her own husband and that of a man she knew had loved her?

I gave it up and tried to shake off the hopeless lethargy that was gripping me. We had gone over every possibility, including that which turned my stomach the most: Silene as decoy *and* as would-be executioner. We had decided that these things would have to be dealt with as they arose. If she tried to lead me off somewhere else I was to insist, pleading better knowledge of patrol movements, on the clump near the beach. Whichever way this went, Finlay and Liantis would previously have taken up position there and would have dealt silently with any later comer. They would also have us covered and protected from the moment I emerged from the villa.

If the troops had been lured away, things would be a great deal simpler, for then I would merely admit her—and Finlay and Liantis would follow on her heels and bear her swiftly along the beach. In none of these contingencies did we anticipate noise or resistance because it was as much against their interests as ours to attract outside attention.

The signals had been arranged. A lamp would burn at an upstairs window. If she arrived and the troops were not here, I was to slip upstairs and extinguish the lamp before admitting her. If the troops were here I moved the lamp to a window at the other end of the house before coming out to her.

I trimmed and lit the lamp and set it in the upstairs window; then I went down to the kitchen and brewed some coffee and made a pretence of eating.

It was dark by now, so I extinguished the downstairs lights and pulled a chair into an angle of the wall from where I could see the lighter square of the grille . . .

It was the explosion that woke me. It came in three dull booms that rattled the upstairs windows and brought squawking protests from the jackdaws in the tree outside. I jumped to my feet. As

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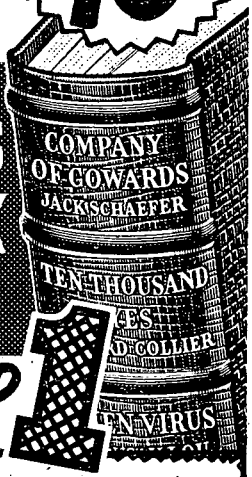

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I did so I heard the wireless in the jeep by the garage leap into crackling life, and the troops come tumbling out under the profane lash of the sergeant's tongue.

I looked at the luminous dial of my watch; saw that it was just short of midnight; and wondered if this was the diversion that Finlay had planned, but I rejected that when after more crackling I heard the operator call, "Yermasoyia Bridge, Sarge. They've blown the bloody lot, and our guard are casualties—there's firing going on."

"Come on, the lot of you," yelled the sergeant, and they roared down the drive and out on to the road. This was not Finlay's diversion, then; but it had had the effect of clearing the garden. I remember wondering whether it was staged by the other side for the same reason. If it was, it was an alternative course that we hadn't considered, and would mean that when she came she might well be accompanied. I didn't wonder for long—for at that moment the tapping began.

I slid into the shelter of the archway and dropped to my knees so that I was not silhouetted against the window behind me. The grille in the opposite wall was a square only slightly less dark than the surrounding walls, and my straining eyes could make out nothing tangible on the other side. I groped for the pistol in the shoulder holster under my shirt, and the touch of my hand was cold against the clammy skin of my body.

The tapping came again—and with it her voice—low—insistent—urgent.

"Peter! Peter!"

My rubber-soled shoes made no noise on the tiles as I moved across to the stairs and up them to the floor above. I peered through the tiny window on the landing. She was standing at the grille. The tapping had become louder and in her voice was a note of panic.

There was no moon, but the stars lent some degree of lightness to the night, and intermittently the Akrotiri light swept the garden. I searched the area between the house and the hedge. It was all clear lawn on that side. A man might perhaps crouch behind the parapet of the well, but even then he would have to run a good fifteen yards if he wished to rush the kitchen door. The walls each side of the grille stretched unbroken on either side to the corners of the house, and offered no cover. I had, of course, been over all this before, but there is a vast difference between hypothesis and actuality.

I strained my eyes for a full minute, and in that minute I had time to think. If I got her into the house suddenly, before she realised what was happening, and shot back the bolts on that heavy, teak door, I would be holding the ace in the box. On the other hand, if I doused the lamp upstairs or parleyed with her through the grille beforehand, I would give anybody else waiting out there the clear information that I was about to make a move—and the chance to close in before I opened the door. The emotional

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issue had died now and I was thinking clearly again, almost automatically—method—courses open—alternatives.

I tiptoed downstairs and crossed to the kitchen door. She was silent at that moment, and I could almost feel her uncertainty through the solidity of the wall. Had I been here I would surely have answered by now. That first moment of doubt is the vital one where surprise is the paramount consideration.

I pushed my pistol into the waistband of my shorts and eased back the bolts of the door a bare millimetre at a time. There were two of them—top and bottom, and the bottom one often stuck. I was praying that this would not be one of those times when she started to knock again and to call almost despairingly.

"Peter! Peter!"

The second bolt came back with a loud click. I wrenched the door open with my left hand and grabbed the pistol with my right. I had got through the door and caught her round the waist before she realised what had happened. I swung her round and back through the door and kicked her feet from under her. She fell in a heap on the kitchen floor. Then I had the door bolted again and was back in the angle of the wall, safe from a blast through the solid teak or from cross-fire through the grille.

I could hear her gasping, almost sobbing, on the floor, and an errant gleam from the lighthouse reflecting back from the opposite wall gave me a flash of her pale face as she lay staring up into the darkness. My torch was on the shelf behind me, but I did not use it then. I darted out from my shelter, grabbed her again, and pulled her into the alcove.

She just said, "Peter!" and now there was bewilderment in her voice in place of the earlier panic. I felt her stiffen as I ran my hand over her, searching for the bulge of a gun, and my mind flashed back to that other time in the cave. I was angry then when Finlay had frisked her. I was doing it myself now, but I was no longer angry. I had no feeling at all.

I didn't want to think. I just wanted Finlay to come and to take her away—and I wanted the morning to come so I could feel the cleanness of the sea on me again. I remembered the lamp upstairs. I had to remove that before this ghastly thing was played right out.

I said, "Walk ahead of me up the stairs. I have a gun. Don't force me to use it."

She didn't move, and for a moment she didn't answer. Then I heard her whisper, "Oh God, you too?"

I said, "Walk ahead of me. There's nothing your friends can do now."

"I have no friends," she answered, and I thought of Finlay's words.

"The people you go along with, then. What the hell does it matter, anyway?"

"Nothing matters any more," she said in a small, flat voice. "God, what a fool I've been!"

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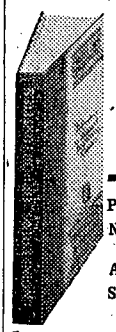

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"Save it," I said. "Finlay will be along shortly. Tell him all about it. I want no part of it."

"So you've made a deal?" she said. "Even after what happened to your wife."

Something snapped inside my brain and I struck out blindly with my free hand, slapping her sharply across the face. She did not even wince. "You murdering little bitch," I said. "Don't you mention my wife or I'll—" I choked.

"You fool," she said, and there was a world of contempt in her voice. "Whatever the deal, do you think they will keep their part of it? Converts are always suspect—especially converts through fear. Do you think he'll let you get away from Cyprus alive—knowing what you do?"

"I don't know what the hell you are talking about," I said. "If it's to confuse the issue and gain time—forget it. All I do know is that you're going to be put somewhere where you can do no more harm."

"I know that," she answered. "You don't think I care, do you? There comes a point where one cannot care any more. One either goes over fully then or just waits for the end, but one cannot make half deals as you have done. They know. They always know. You're living on borrowed time, Peter."

"Stop it," I told her wearily. "Nothing you say can make any difference now."

"I know that, too," she said. "But at least I'll die with the knowledge that—"

"Don't try to dramatise it," I answered. "You won't die. We're notoriously sentimental about hanging political killers—particularly women. You probably won't even come to trial."

She was silent for a time, and I could almost feel her trying to pierce the darkness to search my face.

"I don't understand," she said at last.

"Does it matter?" I wanted this over as I had never wanted anything before. "Walk ahead of me up the stairs."

"Wait a moment," she begged. "Just a moment. What has he told you about all this?"

"Everything," I said shortly. "Your two attempts on my life—"

"*My* attempts? But why should I want to kill you?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" I shouted. "Why ask *me*? Your reasons are sufficient for yourself, no doubt, and for the people you work for—"

"But I don't work for anybody."

"Why pretend any longer? Your people wanted me out of Cyprus to avoid the chance of my running into Achilles. I know too much about him. The fact that he collaborated with the Germans, while pretending to fight for Greek freedom, is the one thing that could discredit him with these poor fools here. Finlay and I are about the only two on this side who could put the finger on him with certainty. So we're on your list—both of us."

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"So Finlay told you that—"

"He has told me everything," I repeated.

"That I am a Communist agent and that I have tried to kill you?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Why go over it all again? It's finished now—my part of it. What follows is between you and Finlay and your conscience, if you had one—if they allowed you one."

"And you really believed him?"

"Certainly I believe him. What are you trying to do? Bluff your way out of it? It's too late for that."

I heard her sharp intake of breath through the darkness.

"I see it all now," she said. "Of course that is what he would say. He has told you the truth—about Achilles, I mean, and about your being a marked man—but he has reversed his position and mine. He is the Communist, Peter.

"I am nothing—nothing except a woman who feels she owes you something. I tried to warn you in Nicosia the other day, but the news about your wife came through. It was that final straw that decided me. I left him that day and I've been sheltering with friends of my father's in Limassol. I came last night to try to warn you—but you know the result.

"I have come again this last time. Don't you see, Peter—it's his only chance. He must kill us both now."

"Ingenious," I said bitterly. "They train you well, your people. That's part of the technique, isn't it? If the lie is big enough it might get over. You've overdone it, though. You forget that I know him—really know him—that we were British agents together—"

"You fool," she said passionately. "How many men, British and others, fought well for the Allies during the war—who were, are, and always will be Communists? How long do you think it took me, his wife, to find out the truth?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. But you can talk till hell freezes before you make me believe that Finlay is one of them."

"I won't try," she said. "I know it would be useless without proof. But I *can* prove it if you give me time. I never thought I would ever betray him. While it was merely a political conviction it was a matter for him alone—and I tried to keep it a thing apart—but now I'm ready to talk. I don't care for myself. I told you, I am past caring—"

"And who would you talk to?"

"Keep me here till the troops return—then send for the police." She was pleading now.

"Uncover him? Hamper his work? What sort of fool do you take me for? Anyhow, why the sudden decision? Why haven't you talked before, if you knew he was trying to kill me?"

"Because I have had nothing to tell until now—and even now I wouldn't if there was any other way. It was only in Beirut that I found out what they were planning to do to you, and tried to warn you by telephone—"

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"It doesn't fit," I said. "You were in Beirut, but he was *here* when I returned. You've slipped up, my dear."

"We left on the night plane an hour after I spoke to the man in your room. You can check that with the police—"

"There'll be no police—" I began, and at that moment we heard Finlay at the grille.

"Peter, are you there?" he called softly.

She gasped, and her hands came out in the darkness and I felt her grip my arm convulsively.

"Wait—wait—" she whispered. "Wait for the troops."

I shook her off and made for the door.

"Coming," I called.

"Didn't she arrive?" he asked through the fretted ironwork.

"She's here now," I answered, as I fumbled with the bolts and threw the door back. "I'm sorry about the lamp—"

They came through together, two dark figures against the night sky, and as their torch stabbed through the darkness Silene gave one despairing cry and rushed forward, and two guns blasted simultaneously— That was their mistake. They should have dealt with me first because I was carrying a gun.

In that blinding instant the truth came to me—the truth of Silene's words—and with it Tony's teaching in swift, unthinking reflex. I dropped and fired in one movement just as he used to impress on me, "—— the thickest part of the sonofabitch's body—and keep on firing."

Finlay lurched forward into the room and Liantis fell across the threshold. I kicked him back over the step and slammed and rebolted the door. Then I picked up the torch and shone it on Finlay. His lips were twisted in a grin of pain and hate, and the front of his shirt was a crimson mess.

He said, "You always were a lucky bastard—you bastard." And he twitched and rolled over.

Silene was lying in the archway. She whispered, "Wait, Peter—wait," as I lifted her. And she died in my arms as the lights of the returning patrol swept up the drive.

The man from the little office off Whitehall has been here for the last time, and he tells me the file is now docketed and sealed.

Tomorrow Jo comes back from hospital, the scars of the plastic surgeon's miracle all but invisible—but I do not think we shall remain long in this peaceful Sussex cottage because the sound of waves on shingle can be disturbing on a still night, and sometimes they burn hedge clippings in the fields—and wood smoke drifts in through the windows.

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 103

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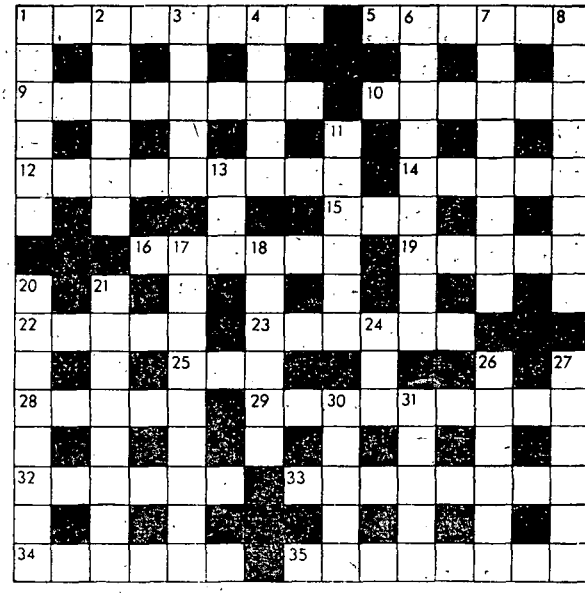

CLUES

Across

1 Unusual game ? No, uncommon underdone (4, 4).

5 Sounds like a wool-gatherer (6).

9 Keep a place for the sack race.? (3, 1, 4).

10 Mae backs into the S.C.R. with a yell (6).

12 Too highly valued by authorities ? (9).

14 Mannequin's poetic at heart (5).

15 Bub makes a row on the axle (3).

16 King Mark's missus (6).

19 Odds are against 'em (5).

22 Ghost with grave reputation (5).

23 Sounds reposeful but drags (6).

25 Rage in Sir Everard (3).

28 Fabricated burn (5).

29 Cane leads to trick (9).

32 Sated, I umpire in here (6).

33 Catch up with repairs (8).

34 Loiter with bird in front (6).

35 Dear curs sprawled at his feet (8).

Down

1 Did he burgle old French king ? (3, 3).

2 Elephants and vagabonds (6).

3 Scrooge in woe (5).

4 "Let it be —— —— lawful as eating" (Shakespeare) (2, 3).

6 Necessary cleric (9).

7 Hewed, led, became persuaded (8).

8 The hour subtracted is eternal (8).

11 Stick to point where B.C. ends ? (6).

13 Penniless Spaniard past (3).

17 Used by anti-gas brigade ? (5, 4).

18 Tide over (3, 3).

20 Worked up politically (8).

21 Melon diet in Xanadu (8).

24 "O'er-—— to Adam's breed" (Kipling) (3).

26 Last letter in crop (6).

27 Trader has pack (6).

30 Shifty chap (5).

31 Giants are more than mineral (5).

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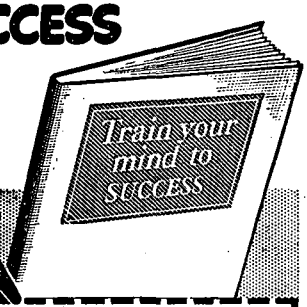

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